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Citizens by waiting: Timorese young adults between state politics and customary authority

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ABSTRACT

Young adults in Timor-Leste often say that, at present, older generations do not let them participate in the political sphere. They also say that they will just wait until their time comes. This discourse is contradictory to conceptualisations of citizenship that focus on acts, dispute or insurgence. In this article I argue that young adults' political membership is much more than their relationship with the nation-state. To this effect I explore how young adults' citizenship is deeply intertwined with their place in three different systems of customary law: the Uma Lulik (ancestral house), Umane-Manefoun (inter-family) relations and Tara Bandu (conflict resolution). By subsequently analysing the role of youth representatives in hybrid local village councils, I explore the question of why young adults decide to wait.

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Introduction

Despite the hot afternoon sun it is still relatively cool under the thatched roof of the 'seminar hut' in the backyard of the State Secretary of Youth and Sports. Every once in a while our discussion is drowned out by the noise of trucks speeding by on the 'Avenue of Human Rights' that runs between the startling blue ocean and the colonial waterfront promenade that houses the State Secretary. I am having a focus group discussion with the alumni of the East Timorese youth parliament about how the different generations in Timor-Leste participate in society. Asked to identify the different generations present in Timor-Leste today, they have classified the population into the usual three historic generations¹: the Portuguese (educated under Portuguese colonial rule until 1975 – now roughly 50+ years old), the Indonesian (educated under Indonesian occupation from 1975 until 1999 – roughly 30–50 years old) and the new generation (educated after independence in 2002).² Asked to mark, on a flipchart, the scope of participation of each generation in decision-making, customary law and national politics, a clear image emerges. The Portuguese generation scores a 'maximum' in every category and the new generation a 'minimum' in each category, with the Indonesian generation occupying a middle position.

I ask the participants, who self-classify as the new generation, how it feels to see all those 'minimums' listed for their generation. A young man states that the people from

the Portuguese and Indonesian generations ‘will not live forever, at some point they will die. So the participation of the new generation is now minimal, but they will go up from the position of minimal to the position of maximal’. A young woman adds that, because the older generations are still around, now is the time for the new generation to learn. Angelo,³ a Law student, helps me reformulate my question by asking his colleagues ‘do you want to wait until the Portuguese and the Indonesian generations are gone or do you want to participate now?’ With some resignation a young woman states that ‘we have to adapt to the situation, we are now in a learning phase’. I ask her whether this means one cannot make decisions and she replies:

We cannot yet make decisions because the generations that are still here, especially the Portuguese generation, they will say to us: “your time has not yet come, we have not all died yet so you cannot yet...” that is how they talk to us.

One of her male colleagues explains to me that in Timor-Leste, according to custom, if a young person inherits an important position from his deceased elder, this does not mean that he can make decisions. It will still be the village elders (big people) who make the decisions for him. He says, ‘we cannot say he is the one making the decision, because the belief in Timor is that the little children⁴ do not know anything, only the big people do’. Here a young woman who has so far been silent intervenes:

I am sorry, but for me it is like this: I can accept if we say that we cannot yet make decisions. But if we think about it, the youth are the biggest group of voters in Timor. So if we talk about general decisions that are taken for the country, we cannot say that the youth are not involved in them.

Immediately a young man counters:

What we see is that in terms of quantity there are indeed many people of the new generation, but their decisions do not have any influence! (...) So the new generation, like we already said today, is in a phase of preparation. Even though we worry about things, we do not have influence.

He goes on to explain that the reason for this is that the youth do not know how to prepare rituals in the ancestral house and do not know the lineages by heart. That is why they do not have influence and are not allowed to make decisions (APFTL, FGD, 08.04.2017).

This article is about how young adults navigate different and at times contradictory expectations placed on them by both the liberal democratic nation-state and the local customary authorities. It might not come as a surprise that alumni of a youth parliament have mixed feelings about the scope of their participation. Various authors point out that youth councils are often ‘quasi-democratic forms of participation’, characterised by tokenism and social control (Taft and Gordon 2013, 97) in which inequality between youth and adults (Wyness 2009) or even between higher and lower educated youth (Augsberger et al. 2017) are reproduced. What struck me in the discussion with the alumni of the Timorese youth parliament, however, was that rather than referring only to the hierarchical relationship between them and the older generations, they specifically brought up their position in customary law systems in order to explain their lack of participation in (national democratic) politics. Therefore, I will analyse how this interconnection between (gerontocratic) custom and democracy – and young adult’s positionality in it – results in a form of citizenship that is mostly characterised by waiting and preparing for ‘later’.

Here I consider citizenship as a ‘complex bundle of practices constituting political membership’ (Lazar 2013, 12). Thus, in order to evaluate young people’s citizenship, I analyse to what extent people feel themselves to be able to participate in the political community in Timor-Leste. I therefore consider that citizenship is much more than a contract between the state and its citizens, it is also important to consider the other institutional levels that mediate people’s political membership (Yuval-Davis 1999). The alumni of the youth parliament repeatedly used information about gerontocratic customary institutions in order to explain to me why they were excluded from participation and decision-making. Through this they show that customary institutions are relevant mediators of (or challenges to) their political membership and thus worthy of our attention when exploring young adults’ citizenship in Timor-Leste. Hence, while the creation of a particular citizenship regime is highly impacted by ‘a range of actors, including the local state, NGOs, national governments and transnational para-statal agencies’ (Lazar 2013, 10), for the case of Timor-Leste it is important to also include customary institutions.

In recent years, the study of citizenship has come to focus on citizenship as an actively constructed status or set of relationships that is greatly defined and redefined through constant negotiations between the powerful and the marginalised (Clarke et al. 2014; Holston 2008; Isin and Nielsen 2008). Citizenship is no longer solely defined as the relationship between the individual and the state or as a bundle of rights and duties within the welfare state (Marshall 1950). In a time of increasing retrenchment of the neoliberal state, the poor, the undocumented and the marginalised have increasingly come to be analysed as actors in the making of citizenship. Citizenship, in this light, ‘is defined at its margins, by those claiming their rights, demanding their inclusion and the right to participate in the very definition of such rights’ (Clarke et al. 2014, 49).

But what if the citizens at the margins do not demand their inclusion but instead decide to *wait* until the moment of their inclusion comes? What if the citizens rather than demanding to participate in the definition of rights opt to ‘follow scripts and participate in scenes that are already created’ (Isin 2008, 38)? In this article I join the efforts to ‘decentralize the state’ in the study of citizenship and to explore how people’s ‘citizenship is formed out of contextually located and animated entanglements of culture, politics and power’ (Clarke et al. 2014, 3). Furthermore, it is important to consider that ‘the room for manoeuvre that citizens enjoy is not completely free, but constrained by legal and political regimes and by the languages of political action available to actors’ (Lazar 2013, 12). Hence, here I analyse young adults’ positions in and towards the sub-state level of customary law institutions in Timor-Leste, as these crucially define and mediate citizens’ position in their families, communities as well as the scope of their political participation.

This article is based on seven months of fieldwork in Timor-Leste (five months in 2015 and two months in 2017). During these two periods I spent most of my time in the capital Dili with the exception of a two month stay in a rural village in 2015 and shorter field visits in rural areas in 2017. I carried out participatory observation at the National University of Timor-Leste, at activities organised by students and the alumni of the youth parliament, as well as suku⁵ council meetings, political rallies, and daily life (both urban and rural). I conducted in-depth unstructured interviews with suku youth representatives (both urban and rural), political party youth representatives, National

Youth Council representatives, activists, suku chiefs and village elders, university students and young adults who actively organised other youth in their communities (both urban and rural). My research participants were aged between 18 and 30 years old, with a few exceptions upward (such as suku chiefs, politicians and community elders). I also made use of interactive focus group discussions that included participatory action research elements.

I will start by exploring how young adults are positioned and participate in three realms of customary law: the Uma Lulik (ancestral house), Umane-Manefoun relations (inter-family kinship relations) and Tara Bandu (a customary form of conflict resolution). Subsequently, I will analyse how young adults participate at the lowest level of governance⁶ – the suku – where liberal democratic ideas of representation get enmeshed with customary forms of governance, constituting a hybrid ground for inter-generational encounter (see also Brown 2012; Kammen 2017). I will show how this enmeshment leads the alumni of the youth parliament, and others from their generation, to decide to wait and prepare themselves for later,⁷ and how that relates to citizenship participation.

Customary citizenship

Customary law was seen by my research participants as the law of the people that has existed since time immemorial, passed from generation to generation through the *lianain* (customary authorities) and with a strong relationship to the spirits of the ancestors. They considered that customary law had held communities together through Portuguese colonialism and Indonesian occupation (see also McWilliam 2005; Silva 2014). Much of the academic literature on customary law, however, points to colonialist co-optations and re-branding (ie., Gledhill 2000; Obarrio 2010; Santos 2006; Sieder 2001). In post-colonial state-building, customary law has also been co-opted into the state-apparatus or its margins (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997; Kammen 2017; Obarrio 2010), albeit always in asymmetrical power-relations (Griffiths 1998; Sieder 2001). Hence, when thinking of customary law, it is important to consider its constructed character, the power relations that underlie its position in legal pluralist institutions and the porosity and interpenetration (Santos 2006) of legal constellations in (post-colonial) states. It is, also important however to acknowledge that, despite its constructed character and permanent metamorphosis, customary law institutions can play a very central role in people's daily lives and have very real consequences. In this light, customary law institutions in Timor-Leste play an important role in defining the position of the individual in the family and the community. This position, in turn, defines what the individual's rights and duties are towards others. Here I will consider three customary law institutions that in my view are important mediators of (political) membership in people's daily lives.

Firstly, the Uma Lulik (ancestral house). The Uma Lulik has a double meaning, referring both to the physical house that is built for the ancestors, where sacred objects are kept and ceremonies performed, and to the 'social structures that guide relationships between members and between the natural, social and ancestral worlds' (Tilman 2012, 192). In this system, the individual knows which role she occupies in her family and in her descent line. While visiting the Uma Lulik for ceremonies she is told, time

and again, who stands in which familiar relationship to her and what her duties are towards these different people. In 2015, I lived two months in a little rural village in one of the western districts. While walking with me through the village my research assistant, 19-year-old Miguel, always told me from each person we came across, how he was related to them. Knowledge of where one stands in the genealogy is important for daily encounters, as it defines how people are to be addressed and what can, or cannot, be expected from them. Although these daily elements of being placed in the community are less strong in the capital Dili, where people meet fewer relatives on a daily basis, students often pointed out kinship relations when they were present. And although the Uma Lulik plays a less structuring role in the lives of urban young adults, the ancestors of the Uma Lulik are very present in daily life and they are considered very powerful. Illnesses and deaths were often attributed by my research participants, both urban and rural, to the ire of ancestors (or black magic). Rituals at the Uma Lulik are to be respected in a detailed manner, if accidents, disease and death are to be averted. Dora, a student of the National University of Timor-Leste (UNTL) living in Dili, for example told me:

Recently there was a man from our Uma [Lulik] and he died because he said something wrong. He said [about the meat served at a ritual] ‘oh this meat is not good anymore, it already stinks, it is too old, I don’t want to eat it’. He went back home and the blood started to come out of his mouth and nose and he died. This is what makes us afraid (Dora, interview, 17.05.2015).

The same fear was expressed during a focus group discussion with three young women in Miguel’s village. I had asked them what they would like to change about different locally relevant institutions, one of them being the Uma Lulik. Noticing they had not filled in anything for the Uma Lulik I asked them about it. Dulce, a spirited young woman who had married into the community a few years earlier answered: ‘bin⁸ Sara, it is like this: I would say we cannot change it, I am afraid!’ I asked her why and she answered: ‘because the Uma Lulik comes from our ancestors (*bei ala sira*). So if we want to change something we are afraid of them. That is why we cannot change it’. Later she added: ‘sometimes we are sad that we cannot participate, but we can also not change it because this comes directly from our ancestors’ (Dulce, FGD, 23.09.2015). Hence, young adults feel that they are not allowed to participate in Uma Lulik activities but they also feel that there is nothing that can be done about it because the rules of participation are sacred and have been established by ancestors who will not shy away from retribution if their rules are disrespected.

Secondly, I consider the Umane-Manefoun system. This system defines which place the individual occupies in relation to other families. An individual is always in a relation of duties towards his family’s Umane (wife-givers) but at the same time has entitlements towards his own Manefoun (wife-takers) (see also McWilliam 2011; Ospina and Hohe 2002). These duties and entitlements are mostly made explicit in life ceremonies such as marriage and funerals. Vicente and Pedro, two students of the UNTL, tried to explain this system to me during my 2015 fieldwork. Vicente explained:

Mana⁹ Sara, imagine you are married to Pedro and then your mother dies. Then Pedro, together with his family, has to bring a buffalo to your family in order to honour and acknowledge all the sacrifices your mother went through to make you who you are now as

Pedro's wife, because they are Manefoun of your family. But your family cannot accept a gift with empty hands so they will bring a pig or tais¹⁰ or something like that (Vicente, fieldnotes, 16.04.2015).

The Umane, as wife givers, are always regarded as superior in the relationship (Ospina and Hohe 2002, 30). However, it should be considered that Umane are also always Manefoun to other families. Hence, various research participants told me that the amount of ritual offerings Umane ask from their Manefoun are often based on what they themselves still owe to their own Umane, creating a perpetual cycle of reciprocal debt. Although mostly expressed in situations of ritual exchange, Umane-Manefoun relationships are also present in people's daily lives. Miguel for example, told me that the family of the powerful village veteran Katuas¹¹ Tadeu are his Umane, as his mother comes from that family. If someone from Katuas Tadeu's family came to ask something from Miguel's family, they could not decline. With resentment he told me how the family of his father had once been very rich, but had been brought to all but financial ruin by their Umane. On the other side of the spectrum, young women told me how their families-in-law treated them almost like slaves as a retribution for the perceived high dowry negotiated by their families.

Finally, there is the Tara Bandu institution. This institution defines rights and duties of people in the community. Roque (2012) traces its use back to Portuguese colonialism although my research participants considered it to be a practice of their ancestors since time immemorial. Tara Bandu literally means to fixate or hang up (*tara*) a prohibition (*bandu*). Research participants told me this name came from the fact that their ancestors used to hang up certain signs that signalled whether, for example, the harvesting of corn or mango had already been authorised by the spirits. Although signalling harvest management is still a function of Tara Bandu today, it has also been appropriated by state institutions in an effort to curb deforestation nation-wide and to limit ritual expenditures in the Ermera district (see Silva 2014). Tara Bandu is, however, also widely used by suku councils for local conflict resolution and it is that function that becomes interesting here.

In Tara Bandu conflict resolutions people sit together and the different parties explain their grievances (topics might be theft, divorce, property damage, etc.). Customary leaders listen, mediate and if necessary make decisions. The agreements reached in Tara Bandu are considered to be sanctioned and enforced by the ancestors and therefore any deviance from the agreements made during the resolution is believed to be potentially punished with illness, accidents or even death as described by Dora above.

Although the police are also present in rural areas, and it would be going too far to state that the national laws and regulations are totally absent from local communities, people's conflicts are in the first place mediated through customary institutions such as Tara Bandu. In the case of more serious crimes such as severe domestic violence, physical abuse or destruction of property (ie burning each other's houses) people can opt to achieve justice through the police and criminal court. Nevertheless, many people do seem to opt (or are persuaded by local leaders to do so) to pursue customary conflict resolution (Cummins 2015). This might, to a large extent, be related to the long and messy processes within the overburdened national justice system, however, I believe that it is also due to the fact that people's daily lives are so intimately intertwined with

various levels of customary law, that to pursue justice through other channels would not, effectively, solve their problems (see also Cummins 2013; Trindade and Castro 2007). This was explained to me by Pedro, who had introduced me to Miguel's rural suku. The suku chief, Pai¹² Donato, had invited Pedro, as a university student from outside the community, to think along in a process of Tara Bandu conflict resolution. The story that Pedro narrated to me was the following:

Arlindo, a young man from the village, had severely beaten his sister Faustina (who was married and lived in a neighbouring village) about a year earlier. Faustina had filed a complaint against Arlindo in court and they were awaiting trial. The local leaders had tried to convince Faustina to solve the problem through customary law and she had refused. Pai Donato had asked Pedro to talk to her to try and convince her in order to avoid a prison sentence for Arlindo. Pedro told me that he managed to convince her because his arguments were rational. He told Faustina that if her brother would go to prison that would be justice. It was her right to send him to prison because he had committed a crime against her. If that was her choice Pedro would fully respect that. But she should consider that if her brother were to go to prison, they would probably be angry at each other for the rest of their lives. Once their parents passed away, Arlindo would inherit the control over access to their ancestral house. Through her conflict with Arlindo, Faustina would lose this access, which would isolate her from her extended family. Worse, it would be an outright problem in case she needed something from her ancestors. According to Pedro it was this argument that convinced Faustina to agree with a customary law procedure and withdraw her complaint from court (Fieldnotes 17.08.2015).

I was present, together with Pedro and Pai Donato, when the reconciliation ceremony took place. Arlindo and Faustina, surrounded by family, elderly male local leaders and the (male) local police officer, in front of their parents' house, exchanged gifts in the form of money, tais and other ritual goods. Arlindo expressed his regret and promised never to hurt her again. Faustina declared not to have been forced by anyone to accept this ceremony (although how Pai Donato narrated the process to me this was not entirely true) and forgave her brother. Although Faustina looked tense throughout the ceremony, the rest of the company seemed elated that a prison sentence for Arlindo had been forestalled and the family was no longer divided.

As the story of Faustina and Arlindo illustrates, customary law institutions are deeply gerontocratic and patriarchal. Therefore, the active participation of women (see Cummins 2011) and youth is very limited. Young adults mostly occupy the role of spectators and assistants at most.¹³ I asked different groups of youth, both urban and rural, to characterise their participation in the Uma Lulik and in Tara Bandu activities. All of them, including the alumni of the youth parliament at the opening of this article, classified it as minimal. During the focus group discussion with three young women in the suku of Pai Donato and Miguel referred to above, I asked the participants to explain to me how the Church, Uma Lulik and Tara Bandu relate to each other and what that means for their lives. After a short period of puzzled silence Matilda mumbled something to Dulce and Josefa in their local language and they burst into laughter. Seeing my curious face Matilda turned to me and, switching back to Tetun, said: 'Bin Sara, we are always just in the kitchen – the three laughed again – and then in a moment like this...' she did not finish her sentence but giggled instead. Dulce took over the explanation: 'we are unsure about these things. Bin Sara, it is good you ask us because like this we notice that we want to study these things. Because actually we should know...' Matilda interrupted repeating: 'but normally we

are too concerned with the kitchen!’ and giggled again. Dulce, no longer laughing continued: ‘normally we don’t sit to talk about these things. Here in the community what I see a lot is that if we are at the Uma Lulik, the decisions are all taken by the men, not the women’ (FGD, 23.09.2015).

Although, by intersection, this exclusion is highest for young women, during another focus group discussion in Pai Donato’s suku, young men also told me that when it comes to the Uma Lulik and Tara Bandu activities, they are often excluded or employed to do the petty jobs such as slaughtering the animals for cooking, distributing food, or building infrastructure for the celebrations. This was confirmed and repeated to me by young adults living and studying in Dili.

What we have seen, is that the Uma Lulik, the Umane-Manefoun relations and the Tara Bandu all structure the lives of young adults and determine the position they occupy towards other members of the community. Although there are differences between urban and rural young adults in terms of the intensity with which these institutions mediate their (political) membership, all three play a role in people’s daily lives. Deeply male and gerontocratic understandings of power and authority have consequently been internalised and are thus reproduced. In order to illustrate this I will now turn to the position young adults occupy at the suku – the lowest level of governance.

The suku council as state-custom hybrid

The first election for local governance in Timor-Leste took place in 2005 (Kingsbury 2013; Magno and Coa 2012). The administrative unit chosen for this form of governance was the suku. The suku, often translated as ‘village’, is not only a geographical administrative unit but also a unit of identification and belonging (see Decree Law 9/2016). The legislation about the governance at suku level has changed three times since the first ‘suku law’ was passed in 2004 (see Decree Law 5/2004; Decree Law 3/2009; Decree Law 9/2016). However, the basic setting was always a suku council with locally chosen and elected representatives headed by a xefe suku (suku chief). Although its functioning is defined by law and overseen by the Ministry of State Administration and Territorial Management, the suku council is not a state institution. Rather, it is considered a ‘community organization’ (Brown 2012, 60; see also Kammen 2017). The suku council is an interesting form of hybrid governance that combines local customary authority’s functions (such as lia nain and suku chief) with liberal democratic ideas of representation (for example women and youth representatives). This hybridity is not entirely unproblematic of course. Brown (2012) for example states that being elected into the suku council does not give people authority unless they already occupy a position of authority in customary systems (see also Cummins 2012; Cummins and Leach 2012). Cummins (2011) argues that the existence of women’s representatives in the suku council, who do however not have de facto authority, is disempowering rather than empowering – for people see their prejudices, that women cannot get things done when in power, confirmed. It is thus, rather, a form of inclusive exclusion (Obarrio 2014, 110–111).

Although, according to law, people who are 17 years or older can run for positions in the suku council, in practice this looks different. As students of the Community Development Studies bachelor at the UNTL told me during a focus group discussion: ‘in the suku

elections we see that someone with a master's degree can lose from someone who has no more than primary school because all people care about is history' (CD students, FGD, 12.06.2015). History, here, is two-fold encompassing both people's descent line and people's participation in the resistance struggle. Hence, although the xefe suku and other representatives are elected, their age and position in customary law systems plays an important role for their election. Often the xefe suku is a descendent of a Liurai ('king') family. Pai Donato, for example, is of Liurai descent and is often also addressed as Liurai when people come to see him with requests and when they refer to him in suku meetings.

Suku citizens are thus not just citizens under the jurisdiction of national and local leaders. As Yuval-Davis (1999) argues, 'people's membership in a state, their rights and responsibilities, are mediated by their membership in other collectivities and polities, sub-, cross- and supra-state'. Hence, a suku inhabitant is not only a citizen but she is also a daughter, a niece, a sister, a mother, a friend and a rival. She is part of a family and is involved in various *Umane-Manefoun* relationships. Her relationships with local leaders, but also her claims to the state (and the possibility to make claims in the first place) are mediated through these local relationships, as Faustina's case showed. I here adhere to Kabeer's (2005, 23) 'horizontal' view on citizenship which emphasizes that what happens between citizens should be considered with at least as much attention as the (vertical) relationship between the individual and the state. What is interesting here, though, is that also within these 'horizontal' (citizen-to-citizen) relationships there are highly pronounced verticalities that profoundly impact the scope in which young adults can live their political membership. Dulce was the one who explained this to me with most clarity. As she was very engaged in the community, I was surprised when I asked her whether she could imagine becoming xefe suku one day and she categorically dismissed the possibility. Although this might also be related to her status as married into the community (*feto foun*) and thus not a native to the local ancestral houses, it was also very much based on how she perceived her position in the community. When I asked her whether it would then at least be possible to become xefe aldeia (sub-level of the suku) she answered:

That might be possible but it will still be difficult because you have to solve problems. To solve problems, if it is among people of our age that is fine, but when it comes to older people like Katuas Tadeu it becomes very complicated, we will not be able to solve their problems, because we cannot tell them they are wrong, even if he's wrong we cannot tell him because he is older than we are and then they are also veterans so for us that is really difficult. . . (Dulce, interview, 07.09.2015).

Although in the case of Dulce her age-inferiority was combined with kinship inferiority (Katuas Tadeu was her uncle in-law) and her gender, the problem she described is neither restricted to rural young adults, nor to women. Simão was a suku youth representative in a big urban suku in Dili. In an interview we talked about his role as a youth representative in the many conflicts that youth gangs from his suku had with gangs from neighbouring sukus. He told me:

Simão: we recently had a problem with youth, they had a problem, they were drunk and I called the police. The police came and calmed the situation and after the situation we sat in the suku office (. . .) I prepared a letter and called them, from both sides. I managed to get both groups to come and sit together. I do not have

the power to handle it, so I gave it to the xefe suku and the lia nain. They looked for a solution and made peace.

Sara: but so in these kind of situations, the role of the youth representative is to call everybody to come together but when it comes to solving the problem it is the xefe suku and the lia nain who do that?

Simão: yes

Sara: why?

Simão: because they are the ones who have power. They know how to talk with power (*koalia tuir poder*). I can only send the letter to call people together. Because in our structure, the power is with the xefe suku and then the lia nain (...)

Sara: and are there problems that the youth representative can solve alone?

Simão: no

Sara: so you always have to call the xefe suku?

Simão: yes (Simão, interview, 21.06.2015).

Confronted with their position of inferiority within the suku, young adults often told me that they are 'just quiet'. Nobody would listen to them anyway and by being quiet they stay out of trouble. Many times, especially in smaller rural sukus, where relations inside the suku council actually overlap and intersect with kinship relations, young adults, if they intend to respect customary norms, are not even allowed to speak up or disagree with other suku council members. Pai Donato, for example, was uncle to the suku's male youth representative Amadeu. Although they had a relatively good relationship there were certain things, as Dulce and Miguel explained to me, that Amadeu as a nephew would not be allowed to say to Pai Donato. Although in urban sukus the kinship relations are less present, youth representatives are often personally asked by the xefe suku to run for the position and often kinship or patronage relationships do exist between them. What we see, thus, is that the liberal democratic position of youth representative has very little substance as it does not correspond to any customary form of authority. Simão and other suku youth representatives expressed great frustration about their position in the suku council. For Martinho, another suku youth representative in Dili, this frustration was so high that he resigned from his post and started an NGO, as he had the feeling he could do more for youth outside of the oppressive scope of the suku council. Now that we have analysed how customary law mediates young adults' position in society, let us return to the alumni of the youth parliament and the question 'why do they wait?'

Conclusion: citizens by waiting

In contemporary theorisations, acts (Isin and Nielsen 2008), dispute (Clarke et al. 2014) and insurgence (Holston 2008) are presented as a sine qua non of citizenship. In short, 'citizenship is partly produced by the practices of the excluded' (Sassen 2005, 84). It is seen as being defined at the margins and as springing from the disputes between the powerful and the marginalised (Clark et al. 2014). Hence, the passivity and conformity of the young adults in Timor-Leste seems irreconcilable with such an approach to citizenship.

When alumni of the youth parliament say that they will 'just wait' until the generations before them have disappeared and that they will, in the meantime, prepare themselves for the moment when they get to be leaders, an image comes to mind of

'citizens in waiting' or 'not-yet-citizens' (Gifford, Mycock, and Murakami 2014, 83–4; see also Hart 2009; Lister et al. 2003). Adults often use terms that point out *incompleteness* to classify young democratic citizens. Other examples are 'learner citizens', 'semi-citizens' or 'citizens-in-the-making' (McDonald et al. 2014). Thus, young citizens are presented as 'at risk' and in need of adult guidance towards the right citizenship (Owen 2014; see also Kennelly 2011b). It should be noted however that this *incompleteness* discourse is mostly used to refer to citizens who have not yet reached the age in which they can participate in the formal channels of democratic participation such as voting or running for office. What is interesting in the case of Timor-Leste is that young adults well over the threshold age of 17, are still presented (and present themselves) within this discourse of *incompleteness*. Dulce cannot imagine she will one day have enough authority in the suku to be xefe suku. Simão cannot solve problems between youth on his own because he does not (yet) speak with the language of power. Amadeu cannot disagree with Pai Donato in the suku council, because the latter is his uncle and therefore deserving of special respect. Faustina could hardly defy the requests of solving the problem with her brother through customary law as she will be dependent on him in the future for access to her extended family and ancestors.

To present young adult citizens in Timor-Leste as 'citizens-in-waiting', however, would be too simplified a representation, especially because they have already reached the age in which they are officially 'full' citizens. I argue that it is more interesting to regard Timorese young adults as citizens *by* waiting. As the examples presented above show, young adults' daily lives are characterised by the careful navigation of the complex hybrid space between customary law that expects subdued compliance and liberal democracy that presupposes participation. This navigation includes balancing these different and at times contradictory expectations society has of them. While on the one hand youth are often hailed as the 'future of the nation' and scolded for being too passive, on the other hand they get told, time and again, that 'little children' should not talk too much, let alone speak up. Furthermore, youth are often presented as problem-seeking, lazy, spoiled and devoid of any constructive form of patriotism.

These inter-generational dynamics are, naturally, not unique for Timor-Leste. Kennelly (2011a) exposes how young and politically active people in Canada are classified by adults as either 'good citizens' when they conform to the neo-liberal status quo and 'bad activists' when they transgress the boundaries of what is considered appropriate behaviour and place for young citizens. In the same vein, Amasa and Thokozani (2011) point out that citizenship education in South Africa is mostly directed at creating obedient citizens who conform to the rules and expectations adults have of them. Hence, a democratic political system is no guarantee for a free and equal participation of its young citizens. What is interesting about the case of Timor-Leste however, is that apart from these inter-generational dynamics present in any democratic system, the Uma Lulik, Umane-Manefoun relationships and Tara Bandu governance all play a crucial role in mediating political membership, thereby adding an extra layer to the contradictory expectations society has of its young citizens. By *waiting* (and meanwhile preparing for later) young adults find ways to be a 'good citizen' in both systems at the same time. By constructing a narrative of 'preparation for later', young adults present themselves as actively engaged (albeit only indirectly and discursively) while at the same time conforming to the framework of what is customarily accepted

from people of their age. While they prepare for later, young adults do not challenge older generations in their present positions of authority while at the same time presenting the image of an engaged youth that is building up capacities for their *future* (democratic and/or customary) leadership functions. By waiting, learning, and preparing for later, young adults do not have to speak up against uncles, fathers or grandfathers. Instead, they can join and be part of the system as (non-threatening) pupils, representatives, juniors, and *future* leaders.

This careful navigation between expectations was underscored, again, by the alumni of the youth parliament when I asked them, in the focus group discussion, to think in small groups and comment on the statement ‘In order to be a good citizen, youth have to keep quiet and respect the older people’. Caetano, as spokesman for his group answered:

We do not agree. A good citizen is not quiet, but respectful. A good citizen is not quiet. If something is not right he/she will say ‘no’. But still, we have to bow (*hakruk*) for the people who are bigger than we are (APFTL, FGD, 08.04.2017).

Notes

1. For historical background see: Carey 2003; CAVR 2005; Fox and Babo-Soares 2000; Gunn 2007; and Mendes 2005. For more recent political analyses see Grenfell 2012; Leach and Kingsbury 2013; Nygaard-Christensen and Bexley 2017.
2. The categorisation of generations in Timor-Leste deserves a brief elucidation here. Although elsewhere (ten Brinke 2013, 2016) I have theorised my research population as an *in-between* generation, in this article I adhere to the three partite of Portuguese, Indonesian and new generation used by my research participants to avoid terminological confusion. The Indonesian generation here corresponds, however, to what others (Bexley 2009, 2017; Crockford 2007) have referred to as new generation or *geração foun*. It must be noted that the research of these authors took place in the immediate aftermath of independence and hence a decade before my own research. A new generation – that calls itself ‘new generation’ – has since constituted itself. The concept of a ‘new generation’ is thus a sliding scale and is indexical, today, of a different group of people than is referred to in Bexley’s (2009, 2017) and Crockford’s (2007) writing (now referred to by my research participants as the ‘Indonesian’ generation).
3. All names in this article are pseudonyms. All quotes have been translated from Tetun by the author.
4. In Timor-Leste people who are considered young are often referred to as ‘little children’. Even research participants who were well into their twenties expressed being called a ‘little child’ regularly by older generations (see also ten Brinke 2013).
5. Suku can be translated as village, see further below.
6. Governance by suku councils entails population registration (births, deaths, marriages, etc.), issuing certificates, being a communication channel between the state and its citizens, supervising local development projects, solving conflicts between suku inhabitants, etc.
7. This preparing for later includes among others: learning about leadership, studying at university, going to extra-curricular courses and listening in on customary meetings.
8. Tetun for older sister, more intimate than the general ‘mana’.
9. Tetun for older sister.
10. Timorese woven cloth, used in ceremonies as exchange goods but also used in daily life.
11. Tetun title for elderly man.
12. Tetun for father. As I was living with his family I addressed him with that title.

13. Note that the position occupied by Pedro in this story is highly exceptional. As a well-spoken university student, foreign to the community, who had a very good relationship with Pai Donato, Pedro was asked by Pai Donato for his input where the latter would not ask young men from his own community, whom he mostly considered lazy and of no help.

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