

How Universal is the Commodity Market? A Reflection on a Market Penetration and Local Responses in Timor-Leste

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This article analyzes the situation of coffee production in present-day Timor-Leste, in which productivity-oriented recommendations for coffee plantation management and site-specific cultural logic coexist. In effect, this situation can be connected to the problem of the lack of agency in local farmers' reactions to market penetration. A site-specific cultural dimension seems to illustrate agency on the rural farmers' side. However, the agency located only within local mediation is insufficient because the very function of mediating markets must be achieved primarily unintentionally under the logic of market penetration. In my opinion, this clearly suggests that local cultural values and economic rationality are interdependently constituted as guiding principles of composition elements of the situation set by the categorization of local institutional mediation of market penetration. It is therefore critically important to recognize that the categorization of social action such as "local mediation" at the base of a discursive space for political maneuvers constitutes the gap between "local" institutions and generalizable economic activities, and not the other way round. Thus understood, a comparative perspective on the commoditization process may direct our attention to the potential plurality in accomplishing the interdependent constitution of universal market and local institutions, suggesting that market penetration and local institutions should be treated as essentially interlaced social phenomena.

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I Introduction

Following the wave of globalization, agro-commodity markets in association with state-centered developmentalism have established their overwhelming salience in many rural

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mountainous areas of Southeast Asia over the last two decades.¹⁾ In present-day Timor-Leste, for example, agrarian commoditization has substantially formulated core components of policy recommendations for rural development in general and high-profile leases of state land for large-scale agribusiness operations in particular.²⁾ Indeed, highly influential market penetration has recently drawn academic attention to many Southeast Asian countries, as had the process of state formation previously. “Commodity markets affect upland livelihoods, social relations, and landscapes just as state policies and projects do. We therefore surmise that research on upland transformations in Southeast Asia needs to look at markets and their effects in ways similar to research on state interventions” (Sikor and Vi 2005, 406). In formulating the precautions to be taken when studying “markets and their effects” in contemporary contexts, Sikor and Vi refer to two closely related points. The first is concerned with the imagery of market penetration, which downgrades upland farmers to mere recipients of commodity markets, or powerless victims of market penetration. The second is related to social access to commodity markets, which, similar to social access to state resources, differentiates “the uplands from the lowlands and social groups within the uplands” (*ibid.*, 425). In other words, these points indicate that to restore the agency of upland farmers to form commodity markets, we must pay careful attention to farmers’ deliberate initiatives against new opportunities and the various boundaries both within and outside their communities. These boundaries are variably interlaced with access to commodity markets, state resources, or a combination of both.³⁾ In this context, Sikor and Vi highlight the agency of rural farmers in accepting and negotiating the formation of commodity markets. In fact, many scholars have seriously considered this problem of the lack of agency in the study of market penetration (for example, Li 2002; Fadzilah 2002; 2006). Consequently, the process of market formation is now seen as a heterogeneous process that combines local reactions with external stimuli (cf. Sikor and Vi 2005, 409). In their argument,

1) For a review of agrarian transformation in Southeast Asian uplands, primarily as a result of both commoditization and developmental state, refer to Hefner (1990), Li (1999), Sikor and Vi (2005), and Cramb (2007, Ch. 1).

2) For an analysis of these high-profile leases of state land in Timor-Leste, see Kanamaru (2012).

3) Although agrarian differentiation is not a main thread of the argument in this article, it can be noted here that the recognition of peasants’ initiatives as a type of negotiability specifically mediated by “local” institutions presupposes the Leninist interpretation that market penetration ordinarily induces pervasive proletarianization as a consequence of agrarian differentiation. Results other than proletarianization are therefore to be explained by vernacular mechanisms unless we adopt a Chayanovian essentialism regarding the resilience of the peasant form of production. This Leninist interpretation is incorrect: there would be no “ordinary” track of proletarianization because agrarian differentiation must be viewed as the “culturally-mediated product of human actions, situated in time and space,” rather than an “automatic outcome of ‘capitalism’” (Li 2002, 430).

however, the restoration of agency resides chiefly in the re-evaluated local reactions. Sikor and Vi chronologically describe Vietnamese farmers' changing involvement in the process of market formation, as they react to changing economic environments. For example, owing mainly to newly developed road networks, rural farmers in the late 1980s began to build a variety of connections with lowland traders who had begun to arrive in their villages:

Private traders started to arrive in the village from the lowlands in 1987, buying large amounts of soybeans and corn to satisfy lowland demands for animal feed. In response, villagers began to purchase agricultural products in neighbouring Thai villages and sell them to the truckers with a significant mark-up. A few also began to buy up vegetables from fellow villagers to sell on the district market. In addition, rising living standards also created opportunities for villagers to make money from processing agricultural products. (*ibid.*, 412–413)

Although overall processes can be characterized as market penetration, the “real markets” involve very dynamic forms that may be called market creation or market expansion, reflecting rural farmers' diverse practices and strategies. At the same time, it is important to note that all these dynamic forms are categorized as reactions to “new opportunities arising from external stimuli” (*ibid.*, 424). Accordingly, the cumulative results of farmers' practices and strategies unintentionally connected them with larger economic forces that are basically outside the purview of the farmers' agency. These larger economic forces may, however, condition people's practices and strategies. Here, the explanatory logic seems to emerge clearly: the unintended results of the farmers' practices and strategies eventually function as a structural constraint, and the farmers' agency, therefore, culminates in self-marginalization, through which they are securely captured by the relentless or benevolent global market, the nature of which is outside the purview of their agency. The logic may further suggest that insofar as the market belongs to a social order that is different from the local institutions, such market penetration finally destroys those local institutions that initially mediated the market penetration. However, this line of argument appears contrary to Sikor and Vi's conclusion. After highlighting “the need to open up commodity markets,” they stated, “Markets can provide opportunities in support of local subsistence, preventing the emergence of further and enduring social differentiation” (*ibid.*, 425). In short, within the scope of their argument, “farmers' practices” and “larger economic forces” can be combined in a mutually beneficial manner. Clearly, whether the market penetration eventually destroys local institutions or not is outside the scope of their argument. On the other hand, in many arguments, the destructive tendency of market penetration constitutes a significant impetus to lead the whole discussion. Of particular relevance here is the analysis that

centers on the new forms of vertical coordination in agro-food supply chains: the so-called “global commodity chain analysis.” This analysis, focusing on newly emerging “buyer-drivenness” in international trade, has described the transformation of old trade linkages into “decentralized but privately controlled production networks” (Daviron and Gibbon 2002, 138). In their formulations, local horizontal coordinations, or local institutions, have largely been dismantled or ignored through the establishment of vertically organized supply chains:

Some farmers, processors, distributors and retailers are incorporated into production contracts within transnational supply chains; others are marginalized; none can rely on stability in a context where supermarkets bring farmers from across the world into competition for contracts—even to supply nearby customers. (Friedmann and McNair 2008, 408–409)

These contrasting arguments do not, however, fundamentally contradict each other. In effect, both arguments correspond to the same explanatory logic: the farmers’ agency culminates in their self-marginalization. On the basis of this logic, while Sikor and Vi’s argument emphasizes the farmers’ agency, the global commodity chain analysis stresses the aspect of self-marginalization. Is it an inevitable consequence of the efforts to restore agency? In my opinion, if one assumes a dichotomy between rural farmers’ practices and larger economic forces and then assumes that agency can be allocated only to the side of rural farmers’ practices, the so-called self-destruction thesis of market society (Hirschman 1986, 109), along with the model of self-marginalization, is inevitably infiltrated. Indeed, a fundamental error lies precisely in the allocation of agency solely to the side of local reactions. In this article, I argue that discrediting the image of market penetration should also lead to discrediting the concept of local reaction in the sense that market penetration and local mediation should not be treated as analytically separable processes. If we accept the idea that market-based relationships are interdependent with the formation of a discursive space, it is imperative to analyze economic processes such as market penetration as a descriptive category of social relations similar to religion or civil associations. This further suggests that the very notion of market penetration, under the dichotomy between universal market and local institutions, constitutes the space for political maneuvers. In the following analysis of coffee production in Timor-Leste, I argue that the exploitation of the notion of market penetration, functioning as a situational setting, constitutes the gap between local institutions and generalizable economic activities, and not the other way round. Thus, the process of accepting these gaps should be examined and the very recognizability of these gaps should be questioned. Further, the concept of market penetration, behind which the self-marginalization thesis is inserted, is in concert with the relative autonomy of the cultural dimension in constituting the acceptable dis-

junction between formal economic rationality-centered activities and local cultural values. This relative autonomy specifically attracts the concept of local agency. Throughout this article, I emphasize that local cultural values and economic rationality are interdependently constituted as guiding principles of composition elements of the situation, set by the notion of local institutional mediation of market penetration.

II Opening a Demonstration Plot for Pruning⁴

Since its independence, rural development in Timor-Leste has been largely “hindered” by the subsistence nature of its rural economies. The development of the coffee-related industry is no exception. Coffee plantation management in the country has long been characterized as being extremely poor. Grievances about current conditions are found in numerous reports and policy documents related to the agricultural sector:

Coffee production in Timor-Leste is based on relatively unmanaged plantations, with bean-gathering and processing by villagers, and scant attention paid to cleaning/weeding, pruning, pest and disease management or planting of new trees. (Timor-Leste, Directorate of Agribusiness of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishery 2009, 5)

Most areas are covered by old coffee trees, and productivity remains low with current minimal management. The following steps are proposed for improvement: (1) Development and establishment of high-yielding varieties of Arabica coffee where suitable; (2) Replanting of plantations with new trees; (3) Development and promotion of better technology for planting, pruning, fertilising, pest control, harvesting, drying, sorting and handling. (da Costa *et al.* 2003, 24–25)

Such a comprehensive proposal for improving the coffee production system clearly suggests that quality-oriented initiatives in the coffee sector, including the sub-field of plantation management, have not been seriously attempted.

As mentioned, one essential technique related to plantation management is pruning. The core objectives of pruning include crop, pest, and disease control, and harvest facilitation. First, pruning aims to concentrate “the vigour of the tree in those parts which will produce the most crop over a number of seasons” by cutting the other parts (Wrigley 1988, 230). Moreover, the concept of coffee crop control has been overshadowed by its tendency for biennial bearing:

4) The material directly related to this section was collected from the Mambai people in Timor-Leste where I worked as an independent coffee consultant to a Dili-based coffee export company, Café Brisa Serena, from August 2010 to December 2011. I would like to express my gratitude to all my colleagues in the company and the coffee producers with whom I communicated.

Coffee is very prone to biennial bearing, which can only be reduced by careful pruning. In a high-yielding year the tree sacrifices the production of next year's bearing wood for the demands of the developing crop, so that the next year's crop is small. The next year, as the tree is producing a small crop it concentrates on vegetative growth, which produces another good crop the following year. Thus the rhythm of biennial bearing is established. It is therefore important to maintain the balance between cropping and vegetative growth, but to do this a considerable amount of cropping wood must be pruned away, particularly at the beginning of a good year. This maintains a suitable ratio of leaf to crop and reduces the risk of die-back of both primaries and roots. (*ibid.*)⁵⁾

As is widely recognized by coffee experts, when a poor harvest season has passed and a rich harvest is expected, demanding that coffee growers cut off the bearing branches is an extremely daunting task. This is particularly true if the majority of coffee growers fail to understand coffee trees' tendency to biennial bearing.⁶⁾ Second, pruning protects the trees from pests and diseases. Pruning opens the center and canopy of the tree and allows better ventilation, which helps prevent certain pests and diseases. Third, the task of harvesting coffee is exceedingly time-consuming, and unpruned tall trees are more difficult to harvest. Moreover, as widely observed in Timor-Leste, many coffee trees are damaged when they are pulled down during the harvest. Thus, the background philosophy of pruning is rooted in the concept of productivity, or more precisely, controllable productivity. Is it tenable, then, that the lack of plantation management in Timor-Leste reflects a lack of understanding about productivity among Timorese peasants? To explore the answer to this question, let me discuss an episode related to a demonstration plot for pruning.

In early June 2011, a manager of a Dili-based coffee export company asked one of the field staff to open up a plot of coffee trees for the demonstration of pruning practices. After numerous discussions with several coffee farmers located near the company's branch in this district, the field staff finally found someone who agreed to rent out a portion of his land to the company. According to the field staff, the farmer's main reason for doing so was the ageing trees in this plot, a problem so severe that few coffee cherries had been harvested here for the past several years.

The area rented was approximately 36m wide east to west and 32 m long north to

5) While the rhythm of biennial bearing of a single coffee tree is explained here as relevant, the scope of this explanation falls short of illuminating the synchronized rhythm of biennial bearing across a larger producing region. Interestingly, most centers of Arabica coffee production in Timor-Leste have long exhibited synchronized biennial bearing.

6) Most coffee growers in the Letefoho sub-district of Ermera, a production center in Timor-Leste, attribute a good harvest to good rainfall. I interviewed 35 coffee growers during the relatively good harvest season of 2010. When I asked them about the reason for a good harvest, all interviewees cited good rainfall, especially its timing and volume.

south. Since the slope was less steep than at other parts of the farm, it appeared relatively easy to implement a radical version of pruning here: stumping old stems down to 30–50 cm above the soil. A memorandum of agreement was prepared and signed by the farmer and the company. However, three more people were invited to sign in order to consummate the agreement: the leader of the coffee growers' group in that sub-village, a seasonal employee of the company who lived in the vicinity, and a son of the landowner.

The next morning, 11 men (including the three witnesses to the agreement) and 2 women from a neighboring community gathered around the holy place in the farm. A coffee tree was chosen and after most of its branches had been cut off, a brief prayer was conducted under it by the priest (*catequista*) of that sub-village and a dog was sacrificed. Manual stumping of other coffee trees in the plot was then performed. The sacrificial meat was cooked and served to all involved, and the dog's lower jaw was placed on an altar. Following the rituals, the stumping of more than 200 coffee trees was completed.

From the botanical viewpoint, as long as pruning is conducted and productivity is enhanced, the sacrificial ritual is tolerable, no matter how unusual it may appear. However, the commensality may be anchored in a broader concept of ritualized productiveness, which is far from being identical to the productivity that results from pruning. If so, a significant gap may exist between the aims and procedure of establishing a demonstration plot. While investigating this gap, two closely related questions must be addressed: (1) Why were three additional witnesses required for the memorandum of agreement when only the lessor and lessee are necessary to conclude the document? (2) What was the meaning of pairing the collective stumping with commensality, a meal in which the three witnesses also partook? Indeed, these questions can be answered only in the context of the ritual-obligations network and its inner workings. In order to understand the contradiction (or non-contradiction) in the epistemological setting between the productivity-oriented and ritualized-productiveness-based views, the social contexts in which the collective stumping practice was conducted must be clarified. For this purpose, it is essential to look at the system of ritual exchanges, at least briefly.

III Logic of Ritual Exchange: Complementarity between Death and Life

Most of the western mountainous regions in Timor-Leste are chiefly inhabited by the Mambai people. Letefoho, a sub-district of the Ermera district where I worked, is also predominantly Mambai, as are Aileu, Ainaro, Manufahi, and the mountainous parts of Liquica. All these areas are major coffee production centers. An estimated 40,000 households in the western mountainous districts grow coffee, and the size of their cash

income from it varies. Coffee-producing areas span approximately 50,000 hectares, most of which are cultivated by smallholders of 1–2 ha (Nevins 2003, 695). A significant proportion of the households in this region relies heavily on coffee production for cash income, a condition that has attracted the attention of certain quarters in the international aid community (cf. Oxfam 2004). Nonetheless, the discussion here focuses on the role of culture in mediating coffee-related market penetration rather than the role of coffee in poverty reduction.

Mambai people seem to spontaneously organize events, especially those requiring collective labor, such as rituals with commensality. The analysis of the symbolic structure of Mambai ritualistic events should therefore begin with the unit of social grouping and the relationships between these groupings. In Mambai society, as with other Austronesian societies in eastern Indonesia, ritual obligations are essentially rooted in affinal relationships, wherein women as well as certain goods are expected to circulate in specific directions. It is, therefore, this circulation that fundamentally prescribes the unit of social grouping, as Traube described it:

Every named ego-group recognizes three mutually exclusive categories of persons: *kaka nor ali*, “elder and younger brothers,” including groups claiming agnatic relations and those sharing an affinal link with ego; *umaena*, “wife-givers,” including all groups from which ego has received women; *maen heua*, “wife-takers,” including all groups to which ego has given women. Thus any descent group may be defined as a male-ordered unit embedded in a wider social universe through the movements of women. (Traube 1980a, 95)

It is this descent group, conceived of as a “cult house” (*pada lisa* or *uma lisan*),⁷⁾ which comprises the basic unit of social grouping.⁸⁾ The obligation of social exchange is presumed to be fulfilled by this unit. As a first step in answering the questions raised

7) For clarity and ease of reference, words derived from the indigenous Mambai language are italicized, while those from Tetun language, the lingua franca of Timor-Leste, are in boldface and italicized. As noted by Traube, the Mambai language in Letefoho differs slightly from that in the Aileu region, where her fieldwork was conducted. While the in-house language in Letefoho is still overwhelmingly Mambai, Tetun is becoming increasingly prevalent in daily conversation, particularly on such occasions as official or semi-official gatherings, considering the possible presence of non-Mambai participants.

8) This unit can be considered as the focal point with which numerous cultural objects are associated. “These include a physical structure, where rites are performed; a name that denotes both the physical house and the affiliated group, and that often alludes to an incident in the house’s history; a succession of male names, beginning with the house’s founder, that is recited on formal occasions; a collection of heirlooms, including weapons and ornaments, that are represented as acquisitions of the house-founder and are stored in the recesses of the house; a set of cult practices known as *lisa*, comprising dietary restrictions and other observances inherited from the house ancestors” (Traube 1986, 70).

above, it can be said that all three witnesses who signed the agreement belong to the same cult house.

To pursue this line of investigation, the role of the cult house will be explored. The relationships between cult houses are developed through marriage alliances, and certain goods and services are expected to circulate in opposite directions. The *umaena* (wife-givers) provide pigs, textiles, and cooked food, while *maen heua* (wife-takers) supply cattle, money, and weapons such as swords. It is apparent that more costly “male items” such as cattle and money are offered by wife-takers to wife-givers in exchange for women and other “female items.”⁹⁾

All Mambai rituals, like those of other ethnic groups in Timor-Leste, can be classified into two overarching categories: one related to death (*lia mate*) and the other to life (*lia moris*). As described by Traube, death-related rituals, also referred to as black rituals, “chart the several stages attributed to the afterlife,” and life-related rituals, or white rituals, regulate agricultural activities (*ibid.*, 91). Within this binary opposition, the stumping of coffee trees and the accompanying commensality can be regarded as a white ritual.¹⁰⁾ However, simply identifying this ritual as a white ritual provides no comprehensive answer to the questions raised previously. To understand the very meaning of the white ritual, the complementarity between the two types of rituals must be further explained.

In a purely schematic sense, both black and white rituals deal with ancestral spirits; however, their pathways are laid in inverse directions. A black ritual provides the living with an occasion to offer gifts to the dead and send them off on a voyage to the mountain and, finally, the sea. In contrast, a white ritual deals with life and fertility. The souls of the dead are supposed to return from the sea to bring wealth, luck, and fertility to the living. However, according to Traube (1980b, 300), this static understanding of the dichotomy between black and white is not sufficient for understanding Mambai symbolism as a whole. In fact, the complementarity between black and white can be interpreted

9) Interestingly, marriage is a relatively minor occasion during which goods are exchanged. The fulfillment of the exchange obligation at marriage is supposed to be postponed until the days of mortuary rituals. “Typically, the initial marital payments are materially abbreviated and linguistically devalued. At most, wife-takers may provide a goat or a horse, referred to as a ‘papaya leaf’ (*kaidil-noran*), in return for a simple meal of cooked rice and pork described as ‘bitter coffee’ (*kefe felun*). The costlier transactions are those associated with mortuary ritual” (Traube 1980a, 96). “Time” is conceived of as being maintained by postponed ritual obligations and reactivated through ritual exchanges.

10) The stumping of coffee trees is an act of agricultural production rather than a typical ritual act. However, since this agricultural labor was clearly marked by a dog sacrifice at the beginning and the commensality of the cooked sacrificial meat at the end, it can be considered a type of ritual.

as two aspects of the Earth Mother.¹¹⁾ The duality of the Earth Mother is supposedly encapsulated in the grand narrative of their creation myth.¹²⁾ The structure of this myth is relatively simple:

1. Our Mother, in the inner night/inner black, gave birth to Nama Rau, the sacred mountain, and seven smaller earth mounds surrounding Nama Rau. Outside this circle of peaks, everything remained under seawater.
2. When Our Mother descended from the northern slope to Ur Bou/Ai Datu, she fell ill and died. Her corpse continued to speak and instructed Heaven (her husband) and her children in the forms of black ritual. “Then seven of the first earth mounds come and cover her body. She lays down her head to the south, stretches her legs to the north and spreads her arms out to the east and west. Her subterranean movements spread out (*loer*) the narrow ball of earth in all four directions, pushing back the primordial waters a short distance” (Traube 1986, 38). After seven days and seven nights, her body was not rotten. It remained whole and then arose.
3. Our Mother, Our Father, and their children made a slow northward journey. The burial was repeated and the mass of earth grew wider.
4. Before arriving at the place known as Raimaus, the first maggot hatched in the still whole flesh. In Raimaus, laying down her body once more, Our Mother finished making the land, up to the extremities of the island, and made Raimaus her final resting place, or the “navel of the earth,” where the roots of Tai Talo, the sacred banyan tree, grow. Here in Raimaus, Our Mother’s flesh finally decomposed but not completely. Her outer or upper half was rotten, but her inner or lower half remained untouched and became the source of the pure white water of the underground, the milk into which all things anchor their roots to nurse. The decayed outer half became one with the black earth, from which all the cultivated plants acquire their “food.”

11) In contrast with the sacred house (*uma lulik*), which should not be touched by the stench of death and decay, each cult house may have a “house of the black,” which is characterized as a “female house” where humans and animals are bred and, at the same time, corpses are laid down. As such, both death and birth are paradoxically associated with the “house of the black.” In present-day Timor-Leste, though, this “female house” rarely exists as a separate physical structure.

12) Traube clearly stated that the totality of the “creation myth” is rather imaginary: “It was not lying about, waiting to be scooped up in the ethnographer’s net as one picture of ethnographic ‘discovery’ would have it. Instead, I freely admit that I contributed to the production of a narrative, by participating in a lengthy process of listening and speaking, a long, twisting, and occasionally painful conversation, repeatedly interrupted by meaningful silences” (Traube 1986, 34). I would like to use Traube’s precious “contribution” as a heuristic device, rather than as “collected evidence.” The summary of the creation myth presented here is based on this reconstructive contribution (*ibid.*, 36–45).

It is through this creation myth that the duality of the Earth Mother, as the double character of black and white, is clearly illustrated. In each action of Our Mother, the double character is readily apparent.¹³⁾ Thus, since black and white, or death and life, have the same root, these two realms cannot be completely separated. However, this story alone does not fully explain the complementarity between the black and white or the nature of this complementarity. Throughout the creation myth, the sexuality or femaleness of Our Mother is not highlighted. In this respect, although the fertility of Our Mother is the principle focus of the story, the complementarity between female and male, as a shadow image of the complementarity between black and white, cannot be sufficiently clarified by the myth alone. It is rather in the symbolic return to the origin as a unifying moment for agnatic ties that the pathway from death to life is constituted. On the basis of this nature of complementarity, with its emphasis on the agnatic ties, the collective stumping described above can be considered a white ritual.

The collective stumping began with two deaths: the symbolic death of an old tree and the sacrificial killing of the dog. These deaths refer to invisible spiritual beings, particularly the one related to the place in question. These invisible beings are often, if not always, associated with the ancestors who initially cultivated that land. Communications with invisible beings are conducted at an altar composed of a holy stone surrounded by flat stones.¹⁴⁾ After the coffee trees in the compound were stumped down, this “white ritual” was concluded by a meal in which participants consumed the cooked sacrificial meat (the head), while the lower jaw of the sacrificial animal was placed on the holy stone and liquor, which had been prepared as a part of the offering, was poured over it. The act of pouring is supposed to cool the altar. In Mambai symbolism, “coolness” is associated with fertility. Further, while flesh (female goods) was consumed, the bone (lower jaw, male goods) was placed on the holy stone as a symbol of agnatic ties. According to the Mambai cultural metaphor, bone and flesh are derived from paternal semen and maternal blood respectively. This logic is the basis of the distinction between the agnatic and affinal ties dichotomy, and the male and female dichotomy.¹⁵⁾

13) Our Mother gave birth (white character) to the sacred mountain in the inner black. She died, but her body was not decomposed. She was buried again and again, and kept traveling. Her body was finally decomposed in Raimaus, but only half of it. It is from Our Mother herself that both “white milk” and “black earth” originate.

14) The stones can also be considered as an umbilical cord because communication with the invisible is likened to a return to Our Mother’s womb. The umbilical cord image is expressed by hanging the small intestine of the sacrificial dog beside the holy stone. Further, the dog must be killed by clubbing in order to avoid cutting the communication route, which is itself seen as a sort of umbilical cord.

15) Mambai people associate paternal transmission with bone and maternal transmission with flesh and blood. This metaphorical association clearly shows the shared cultural opposition between “hard” agnatic ties and “soft” affinal relationships (cf. Traube 1980a, 98).

While the enduring nature of agnatic ties is emphasized, it should be apparent that agnation could not be sustained without “soft” connections through the marriage alliance. By the same token, just as durability depends on perishability, death attracts life and fertility as complements.¹⁶⁾ As seen above, three types of dichotomy—cool versus hot, female versus male, and affinal versus agnatic—are overlaid in closing the ritual, suggesting that together, albeit in a somewhat chaotic way, these dense symbolisms indicate a direction toward the fertility, or “productiveness” and eternity of agnatic ties. Thus, it can be asserted that the unit of agnatic ties, or the cult house, is identified as the recipient of “productiveness” through the conclusion of the ritual. The paradigm of complementarity is so deeply rooted in all ordinary practices that the totality is always conceived of as exchanges between complements such as death and life.

The questions raised in the previous section can be answered here on the basis of the logic of ritual exchanges. All three witnesses and the landlord were members of the same cult house. Two of them, one being the landlord, were from the generation currently responsible for the cult house—the so-called elders. The other two belonged to the generation next in line. This suggests that people in the area recognize that the contract for renting land should be handled by the cult house and not just an individual.¹⁷⁾ Further, these people also envisage that a potentially long-term contract or agreement should be witnessed by the younger generation, which explains why three additional witnesses were required. Insofar as the cult house is responsible for handling the land issue and commensality supports the eternity of agnatic ties as a responsible unit of ritual exchange, it is reasonable that members of the cult house participate in the collective stumping. Thus, the unity and importance of the cult house has been ritualistically reaffirmed in a manner that refers to the complementarity between life and death. At the same time, pruning practices and related expenses in the demonstration plot are economically justified by the coffee exporter by the logic of better plantation management.

The background logic of productiveness through ritual exchange is enshrined in the creation myth in a relatively pure form. It indicates the nature of the rights and obligations related to the logic of productiveness in general. Following this logic, any gain or

16) Mortuary rituals can be an ideal occasion to see through the interdependence between the perishable (mortal human body) and the durable (immortal spirit). It might be easy to understand why affinal kin groups are obliged to support, in fact, to substantially preside over, the mortuary ritual of their wife-givers if we recognize that the immutability of an agnatic tie can be achieved only by assistance from their affinal kin groups representing mortality.

17) This does not necessarily mean that land ownership is basically obtained by cult houses. In fact, Letefoho residents have reported that all coffee plantations are owned by individuals.

acquisition as a consequence of productiveness may be understood as a mode of complementarity and exchange.¹⁸⁾ Indeed, this logic seems to be in stark contrast to that of the productivity-oriented view, which holds that the productivity of coffee plants can be objectively determined by a series of causal mechanisms, no more and no less. This view, however, offers no suggestion regarding how to organize the laborious processes of pruning, for instance. Organizing the physical tasks of pruning is distinct from observing the effect of pruning, which is seen as a consequence of objective botanical mechanisms initiated by pruning. The logic of productivity is seen to be based completely on the separation of the objective world from human organizations in the social worlds, including the organization of labor processes. However, if we live in a social environment where no free labor force is available and chainsaws are not allowed in laborious tasks such as pruning, we first need to consider the means to organize and conduct them.¹⁹⁾ In this sense, the teachings of the productivity-oriented view, such as deliberate pruning, methodologically ignore the labor process and assume many underlying ideologies that presuppose the individuation and commoditization of labor. It is therefore based on a practical arrangement that the logic of “productiveness” through ritual exchange may coexist with the productivity-oriented view without any conspicuous inconsistency.

Presently, Timor-Leste is witnessing economic amelioration, which is represented by the increasing importance of cash income and migration to urban centers. At the same time, site-specific cultural values or local scripts, such as the background narrative of productiveness, may continue to influence many aspects of Mambai social life in that they enable people to coordinate laborious tasks and their meaning. Those cultural values can even be reconsolidated by assuming new roles in the process of commoditization. This is one of the many contexts wherein what McWilliam (2009) called “spiritual commons” persists. Therefore, it should be reaffirmed that spiritual commons, mainly embedded in various ceremonial forms, “should not be seen as something that contradicts or elides the market economy in which all of the societies of Indonesia (for this article, Timor-Leste) are deeply engaged” (*ibid.*, 173–174). Nevertheless, McWilliam failed to explain directly why and how spiritual commons does not actually contradict the market economy. The situation might rather raise questions of who takes initiatives to analytically

18) It might be important to note that as the land rent of the demonstration plot was received by the landlord as an individual, it cannot be incorporated into the logic of productiveness.

19) In fact, most educated groups in present-day Timor-Leste are likely to be the first to promote the productivity-oriented view. Moreover, since their education is nothing but a consequence of the relatively higher status of their cult house, they may be interested in the continuous institutionalization of the cult house through, for instance, the mobilization of labor for the purpose of productivity.

distinguish the community economy from other aspects of social life and how this analytical distinction eventually reconciles market-orientedness and community principles. It should be emphasized that a juxtaposition of local scripts adjacent to the market principle may simply require further explanation. Indeed, this issue can be connected with that of social relations along which both commoditized and non-commoditized resources are distributed, which has long been argued through the commoditization debate and is still worth pursuing.²⁰⁾ In the next section, the conceptual relevance of local institutional mediation as a descriptive category is examined with a reference to labor arrangements for coffee harvest in this region.

IV Market Penetration as a Situational Setting

As Hefner (1990, 234) notes, “a history that seeks to understand the dynamics of economic change . . . must attend to more than the logic of the market place or the interests of capital.” This viewpoint can be encapsulated in the concept of the social embeddedness of the economy, as seen in Polanyi’s pioneering work (Polanyi, 1944). One important implication is that the standard model of an economic actor should be one who is inevitably implicated in identity building with some commitments—usually political—rather than one who pursues optimality on the basis of clearly defined preference.²¹⁾ If we accept the idea that knowledge invariably derives from social processes and preference is necessarily interlinked with personal knowledge, then preference cannot be treated as a mere exogenous factor in explaining economic action. In other words, the knowledge-production process is an endogenous process in the categorization and contextualization

20) In this connection, a new problem has been raised recently in light of the effect of agro-food standards in re-commoditization (Daviron and Vagneron 2011). For a review of the commoditization debate, refer to Bernstein (1988) and Long (2001).

21) Significant elaboration has been made on this concept over the last two-and-a-half decades, although in economic sociology, it was rather disconnected in some junctures from Polanyi’s usage (cf. Granovetter 1985; Zelizer 1988; Beckert 1996; 2003; 2007; Fligstein 1996; Hollingsworth and Boyer 1997; Krippner 2001). These efforts can be linked to some pioneering attempts in economics to recognize the fact that economic actions are rooted in social processes, emphasizing commitments to the moral sense of self (cf. Sen 1977; Bowles 1998). In fact, “new” economic sociology can be interpreted as a reaction to the “expansion of the economic rational choice approach into substantial fields that were hitherto domains of sociology” in the 1970s (Beckert 2007, 6). Fundamentally, the most important insights from the “new” economic sociology are articulated with the viewpoint that identities and preferences are inter-reflexively constituted. This view may resonate with an understanding of representation in its double sense: struggles over the power to label social relations are crucial for comparative and historical analysis and should be related to representations of self and interests (cf. Jenson 1990, 662–663).

of economic actions such as plantation management or ritual unification. It may further suggest that the categorization of social action operates as a core component of the symbolic production of reality rather than as a neutral device to describe social life. In this respect, the notion of market penetration is a particular case in point.

Generally, a major condition under which one can examine whether two propositions contradict each other is that the two are comparable, or at least can somehow enter the realm of constructive dialogue. However, as seen above, the productivity principle and the broad concept of ritualized productiveness in the Mambai context are derived from two descriptions of reality, namely, trunk-pruning for the purpose of plantation management and ritual unification of the agnatic tie, which seem to be unsuitable for direct comparison. It is in this context that one might reasonably ask in what sense the gap between the productivity-oriented and ritualized-productiveness-based views is rendered understandable as a gap.

In a sense, the issue involved here seems to simply reflect the fact that any social action can, at least potentially, be described in various ways: The action-sequence of the collective stumping is interpreted as trunk pruning for plantation management by the coffee exporter; at the same time, it is presented as a ritual for the cult house members, which is based on a site-specific logic of productiveness. It might be argued that each description is a type of rhetoric by which multiple aspects of the “same” action-sequence can be highlighted. How can we, then, recognize the gap or disjunction between these multiple descriptions? Unless we can reconfigure these multiple descriptions against a common yardstick for the purpose of establishing an ordering principle to characterize the whole situation, it is extremely difficult to understand why we persistently perceive these heterogeneous practices as “local institutional mediation of market penetration.” Perhaps the proposition that sounds particularly reasonable is that although no “natural” description exists beyond a culturally specific one, political struggles enable one to choose a description as authentic. In modern capitalist societies, a sponsor may play the typical role of the decision-maker. Then, since the tree-pruning event was made possible under the auspices of the coffee exporter, should we conclude that framing the event as the pruning of coffee trees for better plantation management is more fundamental than any other description? However, this line of reasoning may not distinguish a more fundamental layer of fact in cases where the position of the sponsor is not clear. More fundamentally, sponsorship does not necessarily constitute the most fundamental layer of the event in question. In this connection, the concept of market culture may be introduced in order to suggest that it is this culture that renders market relations universally applicable and economically rational. Thus, according to this thesis, it is market culture rather than political struggles that renders the description of market penetration more rational

and, as a consequence, the gap between market relations and other culture-based relations can be perceived.

However, similar to the concept of social embeddedness, the concept of market culture is extremely elusive. How can we distinguish market culture from other cultures? Or how can originally non-market-based local cultures start functioning as market cultures? If we accept the idea that any cultural form that contributes to the functioning of markets can be categorized as market culture, it seems that no boundary can be set between market culture and other cultures. In this line of argument, the definition of market culture fully depends on the concept of market, whose functioning, in turn, depends on market culture. Here, it may be useful to postulate that the core function of market culture is to be understood as a perceptive mode whereby the boundary is introduced between market- and culture-based relations.²²⁾ Thus, market culture is supposed to circumscribe culture-based relations, but it does not belong to the culture-based realm in this distinction. If this perceptive mode resides primarily in the categorization of social action, such as local mediation of market penetration, through which the naturalization of market-based relations is permeated and culture-based relations are characterized as being unrelated to self-interests, our inquiry should then turn to the endogenous process of knowledge production in which the situational setting utilizing a notion such as market penetration naturalizes or reifies the notion itself. To recapitulate, the gap between market principles and spiritual commons can be perceived if the notion of local institutional mediation of market penetration characterizes the situation as a whole, infiltrating the comparability between the elements comprising the situation. In the remainder of this section, I argue that through an additional case analysis of labor arrangements during the coffee harvest, a critical reflection on a situational setting may shed some lights on the process in which the notion of market penetration produces cultural dimensions with relative autonomy and not the other way round.

Coffee production in Timor-Leste involves varied laborious tasks, and because of the absence of a labor market in the region, all these tasks are currently conducted through non-market arrangements, basically the kinship network. The coffee harvest, sometimes involving more than 20 people in a single plot, is a laborious task commonly performed in the region throughout the coffee season (normally from May to September). As noted, since most coffee farms are left unpruned, the task of harvesting coffee is not only extremely time-consuming but even dangerous in some cases, with the coffee trees

22) Apparently, this proposal does not solve the problem of circularity. It simply claims that the boundary between market- and culture-based relations precedes any theoretical construction of the concept of market.

having grown exceptionally tall on strikingly steep slopes. In this sense, the task of harvesting is even more labor-intensive in Timor-Leste than in other coffee-producing countries. In the areas where I have worked, the harvesters usually receive one of the three types of “rewards” in return for their labor. In 2011, I interviewed 135 coffee growers on this issue, and they provided the following overview of the harvest:

- A total of 54 growers (40 percent of interviewees) stated that the coffee harvest was basically conducted by family members, meaning that no monetary compensation was paid to the harvesters. In these cases, the landowner is obliged to return his/her own labor to the harvesters’ coffee farms.
- Another 51 (38 percent) said that roughly half of the harvested cherries were given to the harvesters as compensation.
- 30 farmers (22 percent) answered that the harvesters received cash, based on their work volume; one sack of Arabica cherries pays \$3 and Robusta pays \$2.²³⁾

If an additional survey were to be conducted in the same region some years later and should the results show an increased ratio of monetary compensation, would it really signify that the commoditization process is proceeding smoothly? The issue I wish to address here is not the credibility or accuracy of such interviews but the very concepts or idioms for situational settings involved in such an inquiry.

Clearly, some precautions are in order. First, many interviewees added that the amount taken by the harvesters often depends on the situation and what they want to take. If we consider this additional comment seriously, their previous answers cannot be accepted at face value. Second, the question actually asked was “when other people helped you harvest coffee cherries, were those people rewarded by money or red cherries?” In fact, most interviewees could not immediately understand the meaning of this question and I had to contextualize the question further by helping interviewees “remember” those familiar situations where the task of harvesting coffee occurs as a labor process.²⁴⁾ However, if we consider the non-neutrality of descriptive idioms, my “help” may

23) Please note that since its independence in 2002 Timor-Leste has used the US dollar as the national currency. Furthermore, interestingly enough, the size of the sack used in the harvesting could vary, although people commonly reuse rice bags (38 kg of rice) or plastic bags distributed by major coffee exporters (20–25 kg of red cherries). It may suggest that rigorous measurement is not practical in their day-to-day practices and people do not judge things against the yardstick of the ideal situation of rigorous measurement.

24) Typically, in order to draw out their answers, I added the following questions: When did you harvest last week? When you harvested, how many people came to your coffee forest to join in the harvesting? Did you pay them money or did they bring some bags of cherries home?

have significantly distorted their understanding and further induced them to frame the situation in accordance with specific economic terms. For example, the interviewees were actually invited to choose their answer from three alternatives: equal labor exchange, in-kind payment, and cash payment. These alternatives are parallel in an economic space, and hence the act of choosing one of them is identified with the act of making an economic decision, even though some additional alternatives, such as ritualistic events, may also belong to a non-market-based economic space. Apparently, equal labor exchange is considered a non-commoditized form and cash payment a typically commoditized form of mobilizing laborers; in-kind payment is located somewhere in between. In actuality, however, these alternatives may coexist in a single coffee plot on the same day. For instance, the following arrangement can be observed: out of 10 people joining in the task of harvesting on one particular coffee farm, 4 people receive nothing because of their kinship-based relationship with the landowner, 4 receive half or a certain amount of the harvested cherries, and 2 receive cash upon their request (perhaps due to imminent necessity of cash, such as for school fees or ritual-based obligations). Furthermore, in one and the same coffee plot, the ratio between these alternatives may fluctuate over time, not necessarily in the direction of commoditization. For instance, as many as 21 farmers among the 54 growers who chose the alternative of labor exchange specifically mentioned that they used to pay cash to harvesters until recently but began the labor exchange as a new arrangement.²⁵⁾ From this vantage point, it looks as if the traditional kinship network has absorbed the already-commoditized wage relations. To understand this expansion of kinship network, it is necessary to review the character of cash income in the regional context.

In present-day Letefoho sub-district, three types of commonly accessible coffee buyers are present: (1) major coffee exporters (more than 1,000 tons per year), who typically collect red cherries at collection points along the road and conduct processing at their own facilities; (2) small- and medium-sized exporters (supplying the neighboring Indonesian market), who are mainly Chinese-Timorese merchants and typically buy red cherries or dried parchment²⁶⁾ from intermediaries; and (3) small-sized exporters, who are typically supported by foreign NGOs or civil society organizations and characteristi-

25) In addition, as noted above, because of the proclivity to biennial bearing, the required amount of harvesting labor may also fluctuate every other year. As a result, if we study the type of labor arrangements in the year of poor harvest, the ratio of family-based labor may significantly increase due to the low level of labor demand.

26) When red cherries are de-pulped and dried, it is recommended that the beans be dried until the moisture content is reduced to 10–12 percent. These beans, actually coffee seeds, with thin white skins, are called dried parchment. Please note that there are many ways to process coffee—converting red cherries to green beans—in the form of which coffee is exported.

cally emphasize social values such as organic certification and fair-trade practices, and who buy dried parchment processed by smallholders' groups. The first two types of buyers weigh red cherries at the collection points along the major roads and pay primarily in cash. In most cases, the amount each coffee grower receives each day would be relatively small, ranging from \$5 to \$50. People usually say that when they receive such a small amount of cash, it goes directly to daily consumption goods such as rice, instant noodles, soap, and detergent. It is important to note that people never calculate the total amount they receive from these buyers. In contrast to this pattern of income and consumption, the third type of buyers, in combination with a micro-credit program or advance payment scheme, typically adopt a payment method in which the total amount of yearly income is paid at once with a notification form in which all production records for the year are noted. Although most elder farmers are illiterate, some of their family members can read, and therefore written records are considered important. Some farmers choose the third type of buyer simply because they want to know how much they produce and how much they get paid in a year. If they are exceptionally productive, the amount they receive on payday may reach \$5,000 or more, although less productive farmers receive much less. When they receive aggregated money, the expenditure plan is drastically different from the daily goods plan. That money can be purposively allocated to fulfil ritual-related expenses, typically contributing to the construction of a cult house, harvest rituals, and life-cycle rituals. Of course, those involved in coffee harvest in the form of labor exchange, even though they may be distant in terms of kinship relations, will be invited and expected to play a certain role in these ritualistic occasions. One may then surmise that farmers who re-introduced labor exchange for the task of coffee harvest must have received their coffee income in aggregate. In recognition of this, some villagers stated clearly to other villagers that receiving their coffee income on a daily basis actually amounts to nothing but in aggregate, it certainly amounts to something.

It is in this context that cash has a compartmented nature in accordance with its aggregated status and should not be universally treated as a general exchangeability. In this regional context, cash largely has specifically allocated purposes.²⁷⁾ Thus understood, this evolutionary model is an ordering principle for those three alternative labor arrange-

27) It should be noted that the compartmented nature of money is not confined within this regional context. Zelizer (1994) vividly elucidated historical transformations in spending money, particularly in earmarking and differentiating monies, in the United States between the 1870s and 1930s. Her argument clarifies that when the households' involvement in differentiating expenditures are increased, people's identities and personal competences, redefining the notion of social control, become increasingly reconfigured through the way of spending monies. It is in this sense that the definition of money as general exchangeability is merely a cultural construct, specifically characterizing the non-general type of exchange as "cultural."

ments and relies on the abstract nature of money, namely, its general exchangeability. The ratio between these alternatives, even if smoothly proceeding in the direction of increasing monetary exchange, does not prove any universally applicable tendency towards a cash nexus. At this stage of the argument, it should be obvious that a significant gap can be perceived between these alternative labor arrangements if they are specifically categorized as an economic means to conduct the coffee harvest. However, if one alternative is specifically connected with a network of ritual obligations, its comparability with the others becomes less clear.

Indeed, a fundamental problem involved here is that the hierarchical model along which each alternative is aligned, namely, the idea that the commoditization process gradually proceeds away from kinship-based labor exchange toward wage-based relations, is entirely based on a specific perceptive mode in which the dichotomy between dynamic and static, or new and old, is introduced. However, the relevance of the mode is examined against the background of the situational setting that is, in fact, rendered understandable only through the insertion of the mode itself. In effect, the coffee harvest practices that could be incorporated into the network of ritual obligations and the purely market-based relations that represent the triumph of the cash nexus are, similar to the juxtaposition of ritual unification and trunk-pruning, too heterogeneous to be simply compared. In this situation, a common yardstick must be developed, typically an evolutionary model in which the dichotomy between new and old, or dynamic and static, may play the role of the ordering principle. When a particular categorization of social action retains, at least potentially, the direction of the evolutionary model, as seen in the notion of local institutional mediation of market penetration, it serves to domesticate the heterogeneity. Heterogeneity, which should not be identified with something directly observable, can be recognized only through a juxtaposition of deviating logics, as was done in the case of ritual unification and trunk-pruning.

V Conclusion

The current discussion can be inter-linked with many arguments in which the disjunction between formal institutions and cultural practices may play a key role in representing changes. It is crucial to recognize that the categorization of social action at the base of a discursive space for political maneuver constitutes the gap between local institutions and generalizable economic activities and not the other way round. Further, the notion of market penetration, behind which the self-marginalization thesis is infiltrated, goes hand in hand with the relative autonomy of cultural dimension in formulating the idiom

of local institutional mediation through which the rural farmers' agency can be restored. It should be obvious now that this manner of restoration of the agency on the side of rural farmers is simply a mirror image of eliminating their agency from the process of market penetration.

In this article, I argue that the exploitation of the notion of "local institutional mediation of market penetration" constitutes the gap between local institutions and generalizable economic activities. Thus, if we observe the situation in which local institutions such as kinship networks compensate for the absence of a labor market, we must first question the condition for compensability. This also questions the relevance of functionalist exposition whereby the logic of market penetration may persist regardless of farmers' practices. For example, in the case of trunk pruning as a method of plantation management, the labor process was organized as a ritual unification of the agnatic tie, which appeared to be local. In this context, it seems reasonable to argue that the function of the labor market is taken over by a local institution, namely, the kinship network. This functionalist explanation can be easily incorporated into the logic referenced at the beginning of this article. The ritual was conducted by the members of a cult house, who intentionally performed a white ritual in order to avoid the malevolence of the spiritual being there, and the function of labor market was also fulfilled through this performance. This fulfilment was unintentionally mediated and will continue to mediate market penetration and, in the end, will open up a path to a market economy. The series of events may be characterized as corresponding to the idea that the farmers' agency culminates in their unintentional self-marginalization. However, the purported agency that is located within local mediation is actually eliminated in the description because the very function of mediating market penetration must be unintentionally achieved. It is a structural problem in the categorization of market penetration rather than a rhetorical problem in the following two senses. First, the logic of productiveness is too heterogeneous to compensate directly for the lack of labor market or, stated another way, the problem of the lack of labor market is visible only if the situation as a whole is characterized as market penetration. Second, insofar as markets penetrate regardless of the farmers' agency, the results of the local mediation, if it is really mediated, must be outside the purview of the local agency. Therefore, unless local institutional mediation and market mechanism are only functionally equivalent, it makes no sense for local institutions to unintentionally take over the task of a market mechanism.

It is now obvious that the concept of local institutional mediation provides a self-distortion in describing the social practice concerned. The concept of "local" institutional mediation necessarily assumes that those institutions existed prior to the arrival of the "external" market. However, it should be clarified that increasing the formalization of

the organizing principles of economic activities dissociates the economic activity in question from the specifications of time and space. Therefore, in this particular social context, the cognitive aspects of market principles inevitably marginalize the site-specific arrangements. Thus, local institutions should be viewed as being localized in the process of universalizing market principles. To recapitulate, the process of reconfiguring the local inevitably postulates the insertion of universality in the epistemological field, whereby locally meaningful places are transformed into spaces for universally applicable social engineering. In this context, it should be emphasized that the insertion of universality, insofar as it is merely a cultural construct, may be substantiated in various manners. Accordingly, a comparative perspective on the commoditization process may direct our attention to the potential plurality in accomplishing the interdependent constitution of market penetration and local institutions. For Timor-Leste, particularly in the context of the increasing emphasis on rural development, the multi-dimensional articulation of various action-models in a certain situational setting might be—or should be—an open question to be pursued.

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