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Cooking as Activism: Affective journeys and the politics of being a housewife in Malaka, West Timor

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Vignette one

One fine day, I embarked on an extraordinary adventure following a group of women and their husbands to the estuary, where the sea and river converged, in a fishing village in Malaka, East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia. With [low tide set for] 3 pm, the women set out on their fishing expedition to catch the fish that would later grace the market (Plate 10.1). With the clock nearing 1 pm, I trudged alongside them through the muddy ground, uncovering the glistening white grains of sea salt as the terrain dried. Upon arriving at the estuary, the women skilfully fashioned a barrier of bamboo, a curtain demarcating the boundary between the sea and the river. This bamboo curtain, their creation, served as barricade, ensuring that the fish entering the river would not slip back into the vast sea again. The water at that moment reached waist-high, and they began to cross gracefully.

As the late afternoon descended, around 3 pm, the tide began its gentle retreat, reducing in height to a mere adult's calf. During this opportune time the village fishermen and women harvested a bountiful catch of fish and shrimp, their hands deftly manoeuvring

> amidst the flowing currents. Around 5 pm, just before the high tide could reclaim its territory, we hastened back to the village. The local fishpond offered us solace, where we cleansed ourselves from the day's daring exploits. Amidst the friendship of conversation, I found myself engrossed in the experiences of these women. Suddenly, one of the men who had joined our entourage, offered an insight, 'Here, the housewives are not confined to domestic roles of cooking and childcare alone. They are untiring beings, diligently engaging in activities like this to earn their livelihood. Tonight, the women will persevere, venturing out to sell the fruits of their labour—the fish and shrimps.' (Fieldnotes, 21 August 2021)

In Malaka, more women have been elected village head than in any other part of East Nusa Tenggara (Nusa Tenggara Timur, NTT) Province. In the simultaneous village elections (*pilkades serentak*) on 9 December 2022, 19 of 119 participating villages elected a woman as village head (almost 16 per cent). This was an increase from 13 women heads among 127 villages (approximately 10 per cent). At the district level, Malaka also boasts three female MPs, who were elected in 2019. Interestingly, most of the women village heads are housewives with no prior political experience. Of the 13 women village heads, seven were housewives, four were development workers, one ran a small livestock business and only one had experience as an activist or social worker.

The comparative literature highlights the potential of NGOs as breeding grounds for women's grassroots leadership and promising candidates for elections (Kabeer 2011). State-led development has also been recognised for creating opportunities for people to engage in development and encouraging women to become grassroots leaders (Jakimow 2017, 2020). However, beyond these, I propose that domestic spaces can also serve as fertile ground for nurturing grassroots leadership in rural areas. Through my research, I demonstrate how years of cooking activism have shaped women's affective experiences and empowered their political agency. This leads me to explore how housewives primarily engaged in domestic roles can emerge as leaders in their communities. My observations in Malaka reveal that women adeptly harness the affective resources cultivated within domestic spaces, particularly when they assume dominant roles in cooking activities within their extended families and the community's social life. These affective experiences are then transformed into valuable political resources.

Plate 10.1: A woman fishing in the estuary, Malaka, Indonesia, 4 October 2021

Source: Longgina Novadona Bayo.

During my time living with people in a remote village in Malaka, I was captivated by the statement about the role of a housewife described in the opening vignette. It challenges the prevailing notion of Indonesian women portrayed in the literature that is often associated with the Indonesian state's *ibuism* ('motherism') ideology (Suryakusuma 2011). In the agrarian context of Timorese society, where the family serves as a productive unit, housewives are actively engaged in roles such as cultivation, fishing and livestock rearing. This reality contrasts with the function of households in industrialised societies, where they have shifted from being centres of production to centres of consumption. The statement about a housewife's tasks reflects the impact of capitalism, which has diminished the family's pre-industrial role and consequently eroded the economic independence once enjoyed by housewives.

In nineteenth-century Europe, the experiences of wives underscored the influence of capitalism, leading to the emergence of new values that ideally rendered wives, especially in middle-class families, domesticated beings, passive and dependent (Malos 1980). Although working-class women in certain European and industrially based developing countries continued to engage in productive waged labour, the context in NTT is different. Despite still greatly relying on the agricultural sector, in which women are heavily engaged, the state has perpetuated a gender ideology that envisions housewives as serving men, families, communities and the country (Suryakusuma 2011: 11). Women are expected to give their energy selflessly, without seeking prestige or power. This conception, foundational to the state's gender ideology, permeates the way women are perceived in Indonesia's broader social framework.

Yet, in the context of my research on women village heads and politicians in the Malaka region, I found that women can effectively utilise domestic spaces, particularly through cooking activities, to accumulate affective resources, transforming these spaces into political sites. As village heads and local politicians, women actively participate in cooking activities for the betterment of their communities. I have coined this process 'public domesticity', whereby domestic practices extend beyond private spheres and intersect with public life, thus offering an alternative dimension to politics. These women use the transformation of domestic spaces to their advantage, turning them into communal gathering spots for discussions, information-sharing and deliberation on public and political matters.

Cooking together frequently in village, clan and extended family settings—tasks typically overseen by women—nurtures a strong sense of affectionate bonding among women. Even after assuming leadership roles, be it as village heads or politicians, these women maintain a feeling of connection through cooking activities, recognising them as essential reservoirs of affective resources crucial to sustaining their political careers. The blending of public and domestic realms within 'public domesticity' is a unique way for women to wield political influence while keeping true to their roots and nurturing the social fabric of their communities.

Inspired by Jakimow (2017, 2018, 2020), I argue that affective resources can be transformed into resources in formal politics. In Indian elections, according to Jakimow (2020: 15), women politicians rely not only on financial capital, but also on affective investments. Before participating in elections, they often work as social workers (made possible by women's empowerment programs) and help others, and thus are loved by their communities. It is through such social work that affective investments between social workers and communities are formed, thereby becoming the basis for women's political capital when participating in elections. This shows that the relationship between broader grassroots empowerment and formal politics is facilitated by affective relationships. However, while Jakimow (2020) shows that affective investment is formed due to the interaction of communities with social workers, my study demonstrates that affective investment experienced in the domestic sphere—the cooking space—can also be effectively expanded into the political realm. Hence, I challenge any conception of the domestic realm as being apolitical.

The transformation of affective resources from domestic spaces into resources for formal politics exemplifies how intimate connections and emotional investments play a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of political engagement. By recognising the potency of affective bonds in both grassroots empowerment and political arenas, we gain a greater understanding of the interplay between affect and politics, illuminating the significance of the domestic as fertile ground for political agency.

While many works critique the notion of separate spheres of the domestic and public domains, few studies explore the political potential of domestic spaces. Rita Segato's (2018) article stands out as an example, suggesting that domesticity can indeed be political. Women transform the traditionally marginalised and depoliticised domestic sphere into a site of political action by harnessing the politics of nearness and the power of affective experiences.

Following Segato (2018), I call this phenomenon 'housewife politics', challenging the perception of domesticity as apolitical and embracing the significance of cultural processes in shaping women's political leadership. Housewife politics thus embodies a politics of local rootedness (Segato 2018), highlighting a specific mode of political engagement connected to local practices and customs, which give meaning to their communities. In this light, the transformative capacity of everyday life and collective experiences takes centre-stage in shaping political realities.

In my research, I delved into the development of the housewife concept within Timorese society, while seeking a comprehensive understanding of women's status and position in the matrilineal society of the South Tetun in Malaka. I discovered that the housewife concept originated with German women missionaries who arrived in the region in the early twentieth century. Their mission was to restructure family life and redefine gender relations, introducing a Christian perspective that depicted women as auxiliary figures, fulfilling roles as wives and mothers, promoting a novel ideal of domesticity for Timorese women. Consequently, this ideology promoted hierarchical gender dynamics within the family that deviate from the Indigenous diarchic principles. By tracing the origins of the housewife concept, I aim to shed light on its influence on the gender dynamics of Timorese society, considering its impact on women's roles and identities.

The South Tetun people have a distinct perspective on women's roles that transcends the conventional notion of a housewife. Rather, they regard women as housemasters (Therik 2004), signifying a more authoritative position within the household. This unique perspective arises from the gender-based spatial division inside the house (*uma* in Tetun language), which designates separate feminine and masculine spaces (Plate 10.2). As housemasters, women hold authority over domestic tasks, including responsibilities such as food-work. It is crucial to emphasise that Timorese familial structures encompass extended kin, considering the family as an interconnected part of the larger community rather than an isolated, independent entity. Consequently, women's authority not only extends over their immediate household but also encompasses the domestic spheres of the clan and village, further contributing to their significant roles and influences in various communal settings.

Plate 10.2: An *uma* or traditional house in Malaka, Indonesia, 14 August 2021

Source: Longgina Novadona Bayo.

Contrary to perspectives suggesting that the kitchen symbolises women's oppression (Charles and Kerr 1988; DeVault 1991; Giard 1998), this study illuminates the potential empowerment that domestic cooking spaces hold for women. Drawing inspiration from Abarca (2006: 19), who views the kitchen as a dynamic space, not merely a physical place, we can see how it becomes a realm with increasing degrees of freedom, self-awareness, subjectivity and agency. The significance of the kitchen lies in the social interactions unfolding within it. Moreover, this chapter aims to contribute to the literature on kinship and women's political leadership by showcasing a positive correlation between matrilineality and gendered political space. I argue that kinship systems influence gender dynamics. Matrilineality not only grants women access to social and material resources but also gives them affective resources. Consequently, matrilineal societies foster common expectations of increased female influence and thus sustain more progressive gender roles (Robinson and Gottlieb 2021: 70).

In this chapter, I embrace a mixed methodology, combining insights from colonial archives with ethnographic fieldwork and life histories shared through interviews with women political leaders in Malaka, West Timor. Working alongside a local assistant, I interviewed all 13 women village heads in Malaka. My ethnographic fieldwork spanned 10 months, from August 2021 to May 2022, encompassing several villages in Malaka, Belu, South Central Timor and North Central Timor. In this chapter, my focus is on the politics of women village heads and women politicians in the matrilineal society of the South Tetun. Before delving into my fieldwork findings, I explore the gender transformations in Timor driven by colonial institutions and Indonesia's 'New Order' state formation. By providing this historical context, I shed light on the conception of the housewife in Timor.

Indigenous gender ideology: A diarchal system

In Timor, the construction of Indigenous gender ideology revolves around the notions of spatiality, fixity and mobility. Timorese cultural imaginaries adhere to a diarchic principle,[1] attributing gender symbolism to the

1 Fox (1982: 25) describes the Wehali system as a classic form of diarchy—a rigorous division between spiritual authority and temporal power predicated on a conceptual opposition between female and male. Here, metaphors based on this analogy abound: the coastal plains of Wehali form the female centre, while the domains in the surrounding hills constitute the male periphery.

political structure. According to Hoskins (1988: 51), diarchic societies are characterised by a pervasive system of gender dualisms—an 'ideology of balanced powers' wherein the male/female pair is organised based on difference and interdependence, rather than dominance and subjugation. This results in the female domain being perceived as the centre (inside), requiring protection from males in the peripheral domain (outside). Hence, the concept of leadership in Timor becomes gendered, aligning with binaries of female/male, inside/outside, centre/periphery (Kammen 2012; Hägerdal 2013) and feminine spiritual/ritual authority, which is typically held by an older man exhibiting performative feminine characteristics, and masculine political/temporal power, which is spearheaded by a man. The male domain, synonymous with 'outside' (the Tetun word for male is *mane*), is characterised as active and aggressive, while the female domain (*feto*) embodies a dark, silent superiority, representing an invisible yet potent power (Fox 1982).

Given Timor's gender-based Indigenous leadership, the ideological construction of the centre/periphery holds deep significance, as expressed in the myth of Wehali[2] (see Ormeling 1955; Schulte Nordholt 1971;

2 In the construction of polity in Timor, Wehali positioned itself as the centrum/navel of all the kingdoms in Timor, which then formed a centre–periphery ideology with Wehali as the centre. This historical narrative was built by Wehali and inseparable from the arrival of the Sina Mutin Malaka group, for it is from them that the Tetun people were descended. According to several historical documents (see Ormeling 1957; Nordholt 1981; Fox 1982; Parera 1994; Francillon 1967; Therik 2004), there were four subgroups of Sina Mutin Malaka, all of whom were brothers, and who landed on the southern coast of Malaka. In the Wehali cosmology, these four kingdoms—Wehali, Wewiku, Haitimuk and Fatuaruin—formed the inner area or 'centre' of Wehali, while the area outside these domains was categorised as the exterior or periphery. To conquer all of Timor, *Maromak Oan*, the supreme spiritual leader who reigned in Wehali (later, during Dutch and Portuguese colonialism, *Maromak Oan* was positioned as emperor or *Keizer*), delegated three of his sons to become *Liurai*—the political powerholders who represent *Maromak Oan*. Because *Maromak Oan* is the supreme spiritual leader, he is not allowed to be involved in worldly affairs such as politics and government. *Liurai* are thus *Maromak Oan*'s representatives for public and political affairs outside Wehali (Parera 1994). The first *Liurai* is *Liurai Wewiku*, which is based in Wewiku-Wehali, and serves as a direct representation of *Maromak Oan* for the Wehali region. *Liurai Wewiku-Wehali* ruled in central Timor—essentially the western part of Tetun territory. Since the Timorese only know two axes, based on the direction of the sun—namely, East and West—the appointment of the other two *Liurai* is based on these directions. In the east or the domain towards the sunrise, *Liurai Loro Sae* (who was later replaced with *Liurai Suai-Kamanasa* because he rebelled against *Maromak Oan*) was appointed as the ruler. *Liurai Suai-Kamanasa* ruled the eastern parts of Timor (now Timor-Leste). In the western part, *Liurai Sonbay* (*Liurai Loro Tôba*) was appointed as the ruler of the domains towards the sunset. *Liurai Sonbay* ruled the Atoni/Dawan territory in western Timor. Before the arrival of the Sina Mutin Malaka in Timor, several groups were already recorded as existing, including Atoni or Dawan people. Currently, Dawan refers to people who inhabit the western part of Timor Island, particularly Ambenu District (East Timor, Oecusse), North Central Timor District, South Central Timor District and Kupang District. All these *liurai* were represented as male. The relationship between the Wehali (*Maromak Oan*) and these *liurai* confirms the diarchy and gendered Indigenous polities mentioned by Fox (1982) and Francillon (1967). Following this analogy, the coastal plains of Wehali form the female centre, with the surrounding domains constituting the male periphery.

Fox 1982; Parera 1994; Francillon 1967; Therik 2004). Throughout Timor's political history, Wehali has consistently stood as a paramount ritual centre and the sacred palace of *Maromak Oan*. The King of Wehali was titled either *Maromak Oan* ('Son of God') or *Nai Bot* ('Great Master'). *Maromak Oan*, often referred to as the Female Lord, was recognised as the ultimate authority in Wehali, overseeing spiritual matters and agricultural rituals. However, the primary duty of the Female Lord was not to rule but rather existence (Fox 1982). At present, Wehali resides in the Malaka district, specifically, in the subdistrict of Central Malaka. For the Tetun people, the Wehali myth transcends time, serving as a sacred charter, a structural injunction and a testament to history (Therik 2004: 79). Yet, in its essence, this myth also embodies the elemental gendered dualism that permeates social organisation (Wouden 1968).

In the cosmic realm of Wehali's symbolism, the elder sons were cast as denizens of the gardens, dwelling in the 'outside domain'. Their cultural role entailed tilling the land, nurturing sustenance to feed their mother and father residing in the centre, whom they shielded. Embracing the mantle of male children within the family, these elder sons, known as protectors (*makdakar*), held elevated status as executive rulers and revered central authorities, bestowed with the titles of *loro* (literally, 'sun') or *liurai* (literally, 'above the earth') (Therik 2004: 75–76). Meanwhile, the younger sons remaining in Wehali, bestowed with the status of the last-born, were deemed 'insiders', akin to 'females', and were perceived as physically vulnerable. Thus, those deemed first-born (outsiders, male) were ritually deemed their guardians, often likened to doors, fences and posts. Fox (1982: 23) illuminates this connection, viewing the centre as 'a kind of receptive powerlessness that left it open to protection and vulnerable to intrusion'. Notably, several researchers, including Wouden (1968: 114–15), Cunningham (1962: 63–67) and Schulte Nordholt (1971: 236–39), have discerned the foundation of this origin myth in the division of spiritual and temporal authorities in Timor.

This myth reflects a curious reversal of the flow of life and wealth. By relinquishing their elder sons to the periphery, the Wehali envision a return of prosperity to the centre, thus resulting in a juxtaposition of life's flow with the flow of wealth. The periphery, in the context of life's origin, becomes both the life-taker and the wealth-giver (Therik 2004: 76). In this cultural spatiality, the *Maromak Oan*, reigning over Wehali, exhibits gender ambiguity. Although male in essence, *Maromak Oan* is designated

as female, entrusted solely with the functions of eating, drinking and sleeping ('he eats reclining, drinks reclining [*mahaa toba*/*mahemu toba*]') (Therik 2004: 62). This portrayal stems from *Maromak Oan*'s role as a spiritual authority, a silent and immobile figure dwelling inside the house—resembling the concept of the female in the Wehali cultural narrative. This delineation of the female diverges from the notion of the male, who has the right to speak and remains active and mobile outside the home. Hence, being masculine in Timorese society means having every right to speak in public (Therik 2004: 76). The personification of *Maromak Oan*, existing as both male and female, illuminates the Timorese perspective that gender is not rigidly confined to fixed constructs or even secure binaries. Such tenets of the Wehali myth shape Timorese people's perception of women, echoing their belief in women's silent, superior essence, revered and safeguarded to preserve the wellspring of life.[3]

Resonating with the realm of the Wehali myth, the depiction of women as 'insiders' finds expression in the spatial arrangement of the *uma* ('house' in Tetun). For the Timorese, the *uma* transcends a mere household status, emerging as the very nucleus of society, a crucial social and political entity. Beyond its role as a ritual centre, the *uma* symbolises Timorese political organisation. As elucidated by Therik (2004: 172), the 'mother', who occupies the inner house, and the 'father', positioned on the platform, become emblems of power and authority. The highest authority is entrusted to the 'mother'; she embodies the wellspring of life and fertility, while the 'father', positioned at the periphery, assumes the role of protector of the centre, providing material wealth and security. In this spatial configuration, the Indigenous ideology of gender diarchy comes into focus, with women central to the source of life and men entrusted with material wellbeing and protective responsibilities.

In the Indigenous ideology of gender diarchy, the spatial organisation of the *uma* materialises the concept of the house and its significance. Commonly, South Tetun has two types of *uma*, called *uma roman*[4] (literally, 'bright

3 Interview with Father Rosindus Tae, senior Catholic priest in Timor, 20 January 2022.

4 The *uma roman* is designed as a residential unit and comes in two varieties. One, a 'named house' (*uma maho naran*), also known as an ancestral/lineage house, contains ancestral relics passed through the female line and guarded by women and a man from that line. The other are houses that have no ancestral relics, known as an 'unnamed house' (*uma maho naran ha'i*). While an 'unnamed house' is a residence for other members of lineages, a 'named house' is lived in by a female guardian of the lineage (Therik 2004: 150–51).

house'), which serves as a residential unit, and *uma kukun*[5] (literally, 'dark house'), which represents the clan's house because it is used to store ancestral relics (Therik 2004). Although they have different functions, both types of house have a spatial arrangement reflecting the Wehali cosmology that recognises the gender division. The *uma* is typically divided into two distinct spaces: the inner house (*uma laran*) is the core living space reserved for women, children and parents, and the outer platform or verandah (*labis*, 'layer') is attached to the living area (Therik 2004). This division guides the roles of household members. The inner space, exclusive to women, serves as their domain. On the other hand, the platform is designated for men, primarily serving as their sleeping quarters. Only male guests are permitted to enter this section of the house. When sons reach adulthood, which is signified by their ability to carry betel-nut pouches, they join their fathers in the platform area. Similarly, the *mane foun* ('son-in-law') has limited access to join his wife in the inner house. The platform area (*labis*) being a male space designates men as *labis na'in* or 'platform masters', while wives (and their children) are known as *uma na'in* or 'housemasters' (Therik 2004: 167). This spatial arrangement of the *uma* signifies balanced gender power.

Today, these spatial protocols have faded with the Indonesian Government's promotion of a new style of house to meet health standards (Therik 2004), known as the *rumah malae/Malay* (Therik 2004: 150). *Uma roman* as a residential dwelling unit has been largely replaced with the *malae/Malay* house, while *uma kukun* is well preserved despite some now being built with materials such as concrete. In terms of both structure and materials, the *Malay* house lacks any necessary rituals for its construction, unlike the *uma*.

Colonial institutions and maternalism

In the sixteenth century, Portuguese colonial forces arrived in the Indonesian archipelago, pursuing both profit and the conversion of souls. Accompanying these colonial officials were Catholic missionaries, who established a significant religious influence in the region. Unlike many parts of Indonesia that embraced Islam, Timor and the eastern Indonesian islands

5 The *uma kukun* is not designed as a residence and also comes in two varieties. The first is 'the forbidden house' (*uma lulik*) or 'the black house' (*uma metan*), which represents the clan because the clan's ancestral relics are kept inside. The second is the 'amulet house' (*uma kakaluk*), named for the *kakaluk* pouch carried by a man wherever he goes. The *uma kakaluk* is categorically a male house because originally it was constructed as a place where men came to seek strength and immunity in times of warfare (Therik 2004: 150–51).

were predominantly Christian. Timor, in particular, saw the emergence of Catholicism in the seventeenth century, introduced by Dominican missionaries.

Later, the mission was passed into the hands of the Society of Jesus or Jesuit congregation, who established a mission centre in Atapupu, Belu District. The Jesuit congregation had already taken charge of the mission in what was then known as the Dutch East Indies, including Timor, in 1865. After serving for 47 years in Timor, the Jesuits eventually transferred the Catholic mission to Society of Divine Word (SVD) missionaries,[6] on 1 March 1913. This marked a pivotal moment as the mission centre relocated from Atapupu to Lahurus, in the foothills of Lakaa'an. The legacy of these religious missions played a profound role in shaping the religious landscape of Timor and the surrounding region.

The arrival of the SVD signalled a new chapter for the Catholic Church in Timor, ushering in the establishment of modern schools aimed at advancing projects of civilisation for Indigenous men and women. However, a gendered mission became evident as the SVD focused on educating men, while the Servants of the Holy Spirit (SSpS) were tasked with educating women's groups. This gendered division of roles mirrors the prevailing gender ideologies of late-nineteenth-century Germany (and elsewhere in Europe and America), which upheld a 'polarisation of the character of the sexes', assigning men to work in the world and relegating women to work at home (Hausen 1981: 63). The roles envisioned for women missionaries by the SVD's founder and the SSpS were aligned with these gender ideologies. Consequently, the presence of the SSpS in Timor, beginning in 1921, about eight years after the SVD's arrival, marked the beginning of Timorese encounters with missionary maternalism.

I adopt the definition of maternalism introduced by Lutkehaus (1999), which was used to describe the dominant character of gender ideology fashioned by women missionaries in Timor. The term 'maternal' signifies a strong commitment to 'caregiving and nurturance' and a focus 'on the

6 The Society of the Divine Word (SVD) emerged as one of several Catholic mission-sending societies established in Europe during the revival of Catholic foreign mission work in the latter half of the nineteenth century (Schmidlin 1933, cited in Huber and Lutkehaus 1999: 182). Founded in 1875 as a seminary with the purpose of training German priests for mission endeavours, the institute's statutes subsequently underwent revision, and it evolved into a comprehensive religious congregation encompassing priests, brothers and a related order of dedicated sisters. Their collective mission involved serving and staffing Catholic missions in foreign territories (Bornemann 1975: 166–75, cited in Huber and Lutkehaus 1999: 182).

upbringing and socialisation of children, and on the development of "inner" qualities of morality and spirituality, all pursued in a compassionate manner' (Lutkehaus 1999: 208). The approach of missionary maternalism was practised by women missionaries to craft the model of the exemplary wife and mother, aligning with the principles of Catholicism. They introduced the domestic ideals that centred on the concept of sphere separation that places women in the domestic sphere and men in the public sphere (Boardman 2000). So, the separate sphere paradigm was introduced to Timor by women missionaries, signalling an encounter between the gendered diarchy of inside/outside and a gendered hierarchy of domestic/public. However, it is essential to clarify that the term 'maternalism' goes beyond merely serving as a female-centred substitute for the male-centred concept of paternalism or a contrast between domestic/public in orientation and demeanour. Rather, it signifies the interplay of race, class and gender for European women, particularly those of the SSpS, who were embedded within the patriarchal structure of the Catholic Church and the German SDV (Lutkehaus 1999: 217).

In Timor, the introduction of Indigenous women to Christian morality and domestic ideals was achieved through schools for girls. A year after the SSpS arrived in Lahurus, in 1922, the first primary school was established there. The pioneering efforts in the mission centre of Lahurus were undertaken by four dedicated SSpS sisters: Sister Gonzagina Van Lunssen, Sister Jolenta Miltenburg, Sister Blanda Dorr and Sister Antonie de Leeuw.[7] These remarkable women were brought from Lela, Flores Island, and were part of the first SSpS mission in NTT since 1917. Alongside providing religious teachings to mothers and young women in the villages, the SSpS mission took the initiative to educate Indigenous girls in the primary school. Moreover, older girls were offered places in boarding schools, where they were taught valuable work and domestic skills. In short, their mission primarily focused on educating women through multiple avenues: 1) young girls in primary schools; 2) older girls in boarding schools, where they received instruction in various work and 'domestic skills' (*kerajinan rumah tangga*); and 3) religious teachings to mothers and young women in the villages.[8] This marked the beginning of a significant chapter in the history of Timorese engagement with missionary maternalism and its educational initiatives.

7 See the SSpS Timor website: sspstimor.org/sejarah/.

8 See 'History' on the SSpS Timor website: sspstimor.org/sejarah/.

The girl's boarding school was known as *sekolah kepandaian putri* ('school for girls' skills') or *kerajinan rumah tangga* (KRT; 'school for domestic skills'). The KRT curriculum focused primarily on equipping women with domestic skills, preparing them for marriage by teaching sewing, cooking and handicrafts.[9] During its establishment, the KRT was accessible only to those from noble backgrounds. This exclusivity was due to the importance of maintaining relations between the Catholic missions as foreigners or outsiders and the local rulers. This relationship was crucial in securing land for the establishment of mission stations, which was granted by the local rulers. Thus, the women missionaries were the ones who introduced literacy and concepts of the modern housewife to Timorese women. Women became pivotal in the civilisation project that began within the household, introducing the concept of the ideal housewife: the modern wife and mother.

During the tenure of the first Bishop of Atambua, Monsignor Theodorus Fransiskus Maria van den Tillaart, SVD (known as Monsignor Theodorus Sulama in Indonesia), who served from 1961 to 1984, the initiative to enhance women's capacity continued. In this period, a junior high school for girls was established in Timor with the primary objective of providing education to Timorese women, enabling them to manage modern households adeptly. The commitment to maternalism was further evident when Monsignor Sulama established the first *sekolah pendidikan guru* (SPG, 'teacher education school') at the high school level, in Belu. Bishop Sulama's education-focused policies extended to encouraging the Catholic sisters to send daughters from noble families to schools outside Timor, thereby facilitating their access to quality education. When Indonesia declared independence in 1945, the scope of education broadened to encompass not only the nobility but also non-noble groups, who received substantial attention from the missions. For instance, access to the SPG was opened to all segments of Timorese society—a significant shift in the education landscape.[10]

The presence of missions in Timor, which introduced new gender relations within the family, challenged the Indigenous gender ideology that recognised the mother as the housemaster. Beyond a merely dominant role, the housemaster concept conveys a connection between women/mothers and the household. Being a master of the house signifies that a mother

9 Interview with Father Rosindus Tae, 20 January 2022.
10 ibid.

embodies the essence of the home—body, soul and spirit. In Timorese tradition, women are nurtured to reside within the house, ensuring their safety and that of all household members. Inside the house, women exude strength as the home stands as a repository of knowledge as much as security. It is within the house that women wield power and gather the wisdom that shapes the foundation of their world.

However, when the principle of gender diarchy encountered the forces of coloniality, it was confronted with the weight of a patriarchal gender ideology. In terms of political leadership, colonial rulers did not recognise the Timorese ideology of gender diarchy. The significant changes introduced by Dutch colonial rule included the failure to recognise the superior spiritual power of women, instead valuing only the active masculine power as the sole political power. Colonial authorities failed to comprehend the Indigenous political ideology of gender diarchy of the Timorese, opting instead to impose a gendered hierarchy. This transformation had far-reaching implications for the status and role of women in Timorese society.

Women's primary spiritual authority was undermined, relegating their political position to a secondary role. When the colonial powers established the hierarchical structure of modern governance in Timor, they exclusively relied on Indigenous men to assume leadership positions. For example, at the village level, the Dutch colonists created the *temukung* structure (equivalent to the rank of village head) and appointed noble Indigenous men to fill these positions. Meanwhile, even noble Indigenous women were excluded from colonial society, confined to supporting missionary maternalism by assuming roles as teachers, nurses and engaging in domestic work for pastoral activities. This gendered division of labour further reinforced a dichotomy of public/political and domestic/non-political spaces, effectively confining women to the realm of domesticity, stripped of authority.

The transformation of the gender order from diarchy to hierarchy reverberated throughout Timorese society, significantly impacting the status and roles of women. This becomes particularly evident when contemplating the influence of the maternalism of colonial institutions, which sought to reshape gender dynamics within family life. This cannot be detached from Mary Taylor Huber and Nancy C. Lutkehaus' insightful observation that 'imperialism was a manly act, the missionary enterprise was gendered as "feminine"' (1999: 12). The ideology of the mission, while promoting

broader colonial endeavours, embraced a maternal focus, emphasising the care and nurturing of children, the education of girls and women and the creation of morally upright Christian families (Lutkehaus 1999: 227).

The mission of Catholicism thus held a gendered intention to transform Indigenous women into 'new women', shifting them from being housemasters to housewives. This transformation challenged the sacred power of women's status as the centre of spiritual knowledge within the Timorese diarchic system. The melding of Indigenous diarchy with the concept of gendered hierarchy introduced a novel notion of domestic space or feminine domesticity, contrasting it with the public space, which was characterised as masculine in nature. Consequently, the public space, which was perceived as superior, overshadowed the domestic sphere, which was designated as a woman's space. As a result, Christian missionaries played a role in facilitating the domestication of Timorese women. The shift from housemasters to housewives represented a significant transformation of gender roles in Timor under the influence of colonial and Christian ideologies.

This experience resonates with Segato's (2018) assertion that coloniality has transformed the gender structure of Indigenous communities, elevating the masculine figure as the ideal human model and the quintessential subject of public discourse—the one possessing political agency. Simultaneously, the women's domain and all aspects related to the domestic sphere were stripped of their political significance. They were rendered marginal and disconnected from the political sphere.

Ibuism as state gender ideology

The colonial legacy of maternalism was carefully cultivated and perpetuated by Indonesia's New Order regime (1966–98), which continued to prioritise the roles of wifehood and motherhood in contemporary Indonesian society. Embracing developmentalism as a state-led ideology, the New Order regime introduced and promoted 'state *ibuism*' as the official gender ideology (Suryakusuma 2011). The term *ibu* not only denotes respect for older women but also means 'mother' in Indonesian. According to Suryakusuma (1996), this ideology led to the reduction of Indonesian women to dependent wives, existing solely for their husbands, families and the state. It defined women as extensions of their husbands, companions in marriage, procreators of the nation, mothers, educators of children, housekeepers and members of society—in that order.

Suryakusuma (1996) perceptively draws parallels between state *ibuism* and the notions of 'housewifisation' (Mies 1988) and '*priyayi ibuism*', as coined by Djajadiningrat-Nieuwenhuis (1992). 'Housewifisation', as defined by Mies (1988), entails the social categorisation of women as housewives, regardless of whether they fulfil that role, rendering them dependent on their husbands' income for survival. Meanwhile, *priyayi ibuism* represents an ideology that endorses a mother's dedication to caring for her family, community, class, company or nation without seeking power or prestige in return (Djajadiningrat-Nieuwenhuis 1992: 44). In both concepts, women are expected to provide their labour selflessly, without aspiring to recognition or influence. Similarly, state *ibuism* prescribes women's service to men, children, families, communities and the country (Suryakusuma 2011: 11), emphasising that women should contribute their energy without anticipating prestige or power in exchange.

The patriarchal grip of state *ibuism* extends its influence across all realms, from intimate family dynamics (micropolitics) to the level of government (macropolitics), permeating daily life and power structures alike, effectively limiting women's autonomy and agency (Tickamyer and Kusujiarti 2012). This gender ideology stands as the foundation on which Indonesian gender relations were shaped, strategically promoting a more nuclear form of family. Within such nuclear households, a clear demarcation emerged, casting the male household head as the representative and provider, while the female housewife and mother assumed the role of the husband's supporter, the children's nurturer and society's guardian of morals and culture (Saptari 2000: 18). In this way, state *ibuism* entrenched a hierarchical framework, perpetuating colonial gender roles and leaving women with limited avenues to attain self-determination.

The historical context I present unveils a contrast between the Indigenous diarchic ideology, celebrating feminine principles and women's spiritual authority, and the gendered hierarchy and maternalism imposed by colonial institutions advancing the ideal of the domestication of Timorese women. The intrusion of state *ibuism* as an Indonesian gender ideology fortified the patriarchal nature of the gender order promoted by colonialism in Timorese society. While the Indigenous ideology acknowledges gender diarchy, envisioning relations rooted in difference and interdependence rather than dominance and subjugation, the separate sphere paradigm introduced through coloniality and amplified by state gender ideology has significantly impacted contemporary Timorese women. Through this historical lens, I reveal the interplay of ideologies shaping the multifaceted roles of women

in Timorese society. Today, some Timorese women are negotiating these apparently incommensurable ideologies of housewives and housemasters to make domestic spaces into sites for creating affective bonds and resources for political office.

The politics of the housewife: *Tanam kaki* and social presence as affective investment

In this section, I examine the realm of domestic politics, unravelling how affective experiences metamorphose into political resources within electoral politics. My focus remains on the narratives of women village heads and politicians who, before assuming their political positions, filled the role of housewives. To weave this narrative, I started on a journey of participant observation, conducting interviews and crafting in-depth profiles. I present two women political leaders here: Mama Rosinda, village head of Mandala, and Mama Retha, a woman MP of Malaka. Mindful of preserving their identities, I assign pseudonyms to safeguard their names and the villages they lead.[11]

Mama Rosinda

During my conversation with Mama Rosinda, the village head of Mandala, she consistently emphasised the core concept of *tanam kaki* ('grounded feet' or 'planting the feet') as her strategic political investment during the 2017 village head election. In a tightly knit community of approximately 1,500 people, the bonds among villagers grow stronger through their active participation in various social gatherings held within the village. Mama Rosinda shared:

> Before assuming the role of village head, I was not actively involved in village governance as I preferred not to be managed by others. However, whenever there was a social event like a wedding, funeral or any other village celebration, I would wholeheartedly partake in what is known as *tanam kaki* … Through *tanam kaki*, we extend our assistance and support during family gatherings, diligently contributing to household chores, such as food preparation, cooking in the kitchen and ensuring everything is well taken care of until the completion of the event.

11 Pseudonyms have also been assigned to my esteemed research assistants, protecting their invaluable contributions.

Mama Rosinda believes that the community values her presence more than material or monetary contributions. She continued: 'It is the essence of being present that matters most to them … The villagers here may not forget the service I provided and the genuine presence I offered.'[12]

The affective investment made by Mama Rosinda was a result of her long-term dedication and effort. She had cultivated bonds with women in the community long before her tenure as the village head. Mama Rosinda, in her eloquent expression, revealed that despite not actively participating in official village meetings, she consistently favoured social gatherings with her presence. This commitment was further affirmed and supported by her elder brother, who holds a distinguished position as a senior Catholic priest in Timor. He shared his observations, stating:

> [*T*]*anam kaki* is not something that happens automatically, meaning you don't just show up if you want to run as a candidate. Mama Rosinda has been consistently engaging in *tanam kaki* within the community for a significant period. For instance, at a wedding celebration, she would attend and offer her assistance from the background, often lending her support in the kitchen.[13]

Mama Rosinda's genuine involvement and compassionate contributions have made a lasting impact on the community and serve as a testament to her commitment to the wellbeing of her fellow villagers.

With her lineage as a descendant of the noble family in her village, Mama Rosinda wielded the power to rally other village women to actively participate in these social gatherings. This form of Indigenous political leadership is encapsulated in the term *tai* (or *tei*) *manu'ak* (literally, 'her stomach is very wide'), which metaphorically suggests that food barns are open to all who come, symbolising the duty of a noble leader to ensure that food is prepared for everyone. By generously providing food to the people, leaders are held in high regard and, in return, their people replenish their barns with bountiful crops. Thus, the essence of *tai manu'ak* is that a leader must embrace the practice of living and dining with their people while wholeheartedly serving them. *Tanam kaki*, therefore, embodies the exemplary characteristics that nobles should embody in their leadership role.

12 Interview with Mama Rosinda, 6 September 2021.
13 Interview with Father Rosindus Tae, 20 January 2022.

Mama Rosinda's noble background is reinforced by her eldest brother being a respected Catholic priest, which holds great significance in her community. With a Catholic family background and such influential familial ties, Mama Rosinda's candidacy as the village head was undoubtedly strengthened. Interestingly, before Mama Rosinda decided to run for the village head position, her husband had stood for election as village head, but he narrowly lost to another candidate. When he ran for the legislative candidacy in Malaka district, he was similarly defeated.

When I was talking with one of the research assistants who accompanied me to Mandala village, and who has a kinship connection with Mama Rosinda's family, he shared this insight about the consecutive defeats experienced by Mama Rosinda's husband:

> Being a son-in-law [*mane foun*] makes it difficult to win in his wife's village. However, people in Mandala always think ahead and consider preserving Mama Rosinda's husband's feelings. For example, during village events, they wouldn't allow a member of the Regional People's Representative Council [*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah*, DPRD] to sit on a mat on the ground. According to the tradition here, due to his position as a *mane foun*, he is not entitled to sit on the platform.[14]

This explanation reinforces the significance of Mama Rosinda's husband's defeat, highlighting the enduring influence of the matrilineal kinship system on the political behaviour of the villagers in Malaka. The matrilineality of South Tetun is accompanied by uxorilocality in postmarital residence—that is, the man leaves his natal house after marriage and resides in his wife's house. This transition bestows on him the status of a 'new man' (*mane foun*; known as *anak mantu* ['son-in-law'] in Indonesian), while the bride assumes the role of a 'new woman' (*feto foun*). As a *mane foun*, he is considered a 'guest' in his wife's house This guest status becomes particularly apparent during social gatherings, when house members have the privilege of sitting on the platform, while the *mane foun* (those residing in their wives' houses) sit on mats spread on the ground (see Therik 2004). Moreover, *mane foun* are also involved in domestic activities, including cooking during social gatherings of their wives' clan.

Due to his status as *mane foun* in Mandala village, Mama Rosinda's husband faced challenges running for election as village head and as a legislative member in Malaka. In the villagers' view, they would feel uneasy seeing their

14 Interview with Tobius, 17 September 2021.

leader sitting on mats spread on the ground due to his *mane foun* status, while ordinary villagers who were his wife's brothers occupied the upper platform. This sophisticated cultural feeling made it difficult for Mama Rosinda's husband to succeed in electoral contests. However, the situation changed when Mama Rosinda herself ran for village head. In the context of South Tetun's matrilineality, women hold the role of guardians of the village and house, as all property, land and houses are passed from one generation of women to the next. Hence, women's position is valued over men's. Within Mama Rosinda, a convergence of three significant social aspects takes place: *tanam kaki*, her noble background and her status as a daughter in an uxorilocal, matrilineal system—all of which played a crucial role in her successful election as the village head in Mandala.

Mama Retha

Steeped in the traditions of Malaka that celebrate motherhood, cooking holds a central place in the daily rhythms of mothers. Mama Retha, raised in a noble, middle-class family, was immersed from a tender age in the knowledge and skills required to proficiently manage household chores. Her passion for cookery is deeply cherished among her extended family, becoming an integral part of their memories. Kanisius, Mama Retha's cousin, told me: 'Mama Retha has been selling cakes since she was a child because they live near the dormitories, such as the parish dormitories, [the] Teacher Education School and high schools, where her cakes are kept.'[15] From her earliest years, Mama Retha cultivated a profound love for cooking and actively participated in the kitchen during familial and customary gatherings organised by her family or the members of her *uma*. Even after her marriage, Mama Retha pursued her cooking passion, establishing a successful catering business in her own home. In 1996, Mama Retha married Bapak Theodorus, who is currently serving as the head of a government agency in Malaka district. Hailing from a local aristocratic group in Malaka, some of Bapak's close relatives have emerged as prominent politicians in the region, including former *bupati* ('heads of district') of Malaka.

When Mama Retha's husband embarked on his civil service career in Malaka, he encouraged Mama Retha to venture into politics. In 1999, she officially joined the Golkar Party at the subdistrict level and decided to run as a legislative candidate representing Golkar in the 1999 elections.

15 Interview with Kanisius, 26 September 2021.

Unfortunately, Mama Retha fell short of securing a seat in that election. In 2014, she left Golkar to join the People's Conscience Party (Partai Hati Nurani Rakyat, or Hanura). It was through Hanura that Mama Retha achieved success, securing a seat in the Malaka DPRD for two consecutive terms, 2014 to 2019 and 2019 to 2024.

Mama Retha attributes her success as a female MP to the strong support of her extended family and her significant position as a daughter within the matrilineal system of Malaka. Embracing her role as 'guardian of the *uma*', she upholds a sense of responsibility for the wellbeing and prosperity of her clan, surpassing the role typically granted to her male counterparts. The cultural practice of uxorilocal marriage is viewed with disfavour in political terms as it tends to diminish a man's authority within his wife's clan. Mama Retha expressed her appreciation for this integral aspect of her identity as a woman in Malaka: 'It is preferable for our daughters to become MPs, as they will be able to care for us … If a son becomes an MP, he may prioritise his wife's family instead.'

Beyond the strength of her familial bonds, Mama Retha's expertise in the culinary arts within her clan and her village significantly strengthens the support and votes of villagers from her electoral district. Within the clan, Mama Retha's dedication to kitchen duties is revered by all members of her extended family. She actively engages in nearly every cooking event within her familial circle. Similarly, at the community level, her emotional closeness with the villagers developed through her initiative to establish a catering group with fellow mothers in Bakiruk, where she currently lives. Mama Retha's popularity in her neighbourhood flourished as she contributed to and coordinated cooking activities during village gatherings. 'Her active involvement in community cooking activities in Bakiruk led to Mama Retha receiving 400 votes during the first term. Bakiruk is the most populous village,' shared Kanisius.

In her second legislative term, Mama Retha experienced a significant increase, earning 1,952 votes in the 2019 election (Jenahas 2019). According to Mama Retha, the increase in votes was partly because she continued to maintain social intimacy with her constituents, which involves nurturing socially affective ties. Mama Retha believes the essence of her support lies in her devoted presence during the momentous social gatherings of her constituents, safeguarding her support base. She told me: 'After being elected as a legislative member, we must strive to retain that position. So, I take great care of the people who have chosen me. I make every effort to

fulfil their needs related to their wellbeing.' Along with the social affect that Mama Retha developed in maintaining relationships with her constituents, placing witnesses at each polling station (*tempat pengumuman suara*) was one of her tactics for victory in the 2019 elections. This strategy differed from her approach in the previous term, as she recognised the importance of both familial support and financial capital to ensure the presence of witnesses at every polling station.

Through her cooking competency, Mama Retha has gained an appreciation of the underlying costs entailed in family gatherings, be they weddings, funerals or *sambut baru*[16] ceremonies. As a result, whenever her constituents extend invitations to such events, Mama Retha ensures that attending and offering her support take precedence, whether in the form of financial contributions or material assistance. Accepting this duty, she shoulders the responsibility of providing aid to ease the financial strain accompanying these momentous family occasions. She explained:

> If there is a funeral ceremony, I must be present. I always help in various forms, such as contributing towards the coffin, providing livestock for slaughter, giving rice or money. Whether or not the person has a direct familial relationship with me is not a concern if they are my constituents. I must take care of my constituents because they are the ones who voted for me. It's important. By doing so, if we run as candidates again, they will surely vote for us. Wherever my constituents hold a ceremony, I will be there, no matter the circumstances. If I am unable to attend due to being away on duty, my husband or relatives will attend.

With a robust social presence, Mama Retha adeptly practised patronage politics by actively assisting her constituents in resolving various personal matters. Her support extended across a wide spectrum, from aiding with national identity card issues and facilitating bank transactions to settling fines and contributing construction materials for housing projects. Additionally, she endeavoured to secure 'decent' employment opportunities for her constituents. Mama Retha's commitment to providing comprehensive support has earned her trust within her community. She observed:

16 *Sambut baru* is the local phrase used to commemorate the joyous occasion of receiving the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

> We are roughly like their servants. We must take care of administrative stuff such as KTP [National Identity Card] as they surely do not want to queue at the office but ask Mama to help them. Even when the motorbike is ticketed by the police, they will call Mama to ask for help to talk to the police or pay the ticket fine. One day, I was even phoned by one of my constituents to help him disburse his loan at the bank. So, I then had to contact the bank so that the loan could be disbursed immediately.

Mama Retha's experiences in meeting the needs of her constituents speak to the blurred boundaries between the public and private domains, revealing how the notion of separate spheres is messy.

Fascinatingly, despite her esteemed position as a legislative member, Mama Retha takes pride in actively engaging in food-work during social gatherings arranged by her relatives or affiliated clans. According to Kanisius:

> In Kamanasa, she always took charge of the back of the house [that is, kitchen]. Even after becoming a legislative member, she still commands the kitchen … When there are family gatherings, she brings all the kitchen equipment … She has always been like that.

Mama Retha's unwavering commitment to overseeing cooking activities exemplifies the status of women as housemasters, retaining their authority over domestic tasks. It suggests that the process of domestication of Timorese women has not been entirely successful. The idealised notion of a Timorese woman as housemaster remains ingrained in Mama Retha's thinking. One of my interviewees, Father Rosindus Tae, emphasised the significance of being a woman in Malaka:

> If you want to give something, every time you visit someone's house, you should not enter from the front but go straight to the back. By entering from the back, your position will be 'higher'. So, even if our social status is high, we must go straight to the back [that is, the kitchen] to help them cook. By doing so, your name will be etched in their memory.[17]

The political strategies employed by Mama Retha have garnered widespread recognition from many villagers, particularly the women whom I had the privilege of meeting during my fieldwork. In one of the villages that falls within Mama Retha's electoral district, I found that many women with whom

17 Interview with Father Rosindus Tae, 27 January 2022.

I spoke were acquainted with her name and contributions. As a testament to Mama Retha's significant impact, Mama Fidelia, for instance, revealed that she came to know Mama Retha through the care and involvement she displayed in various social gatherings within the community:

> If there is an event here, whether it's a joyous occasion like a wedding or a mournful event like a funeral, if Mama Retha hears about it in advance, she will immediately send equipment such as chairs, tables or tents. Even if Mama Retha only learns about the event over the phone, she still sends the necessary supplies. On the contrary, if we have an event but we don't inform her, she might get a little upset, especially if she hears about the event from someone else. She can get angry about it.[18]

In the realm of women such as Mama Retha, the affective experiences intertwined with cooking activities and social presence encapsulates the core concept of *tanam kaki*. For Mama Retha, the kitchen is not merely a physical space; it embodies an affective space—a realm where emotions are awakened and connections with the world are felt. These domestic spaces become arenas of affective investment, where household activities transcend the mundane, influencing the fabric of public life. For Mama Retha, cooking not only serves as a means of sustenance; it also becomes a powerful form of activism, from which the affective investments during electoral moments manifest into tangible support in the form of votes.

Conclusion

Historically, the Indigenous political system's gender diarchy faced erosion under the influence of colonial maternalism and the state's gender ideology, advocating state *ibuism*—all seeking to reshape family-based gender relations. The colonial missions, as maternalistic institutions, introduced the novel concept of the 'housewife', which was previously unknown to local people, who instead conceived of women as housemasters. This fostered the emergence of a paradigm of separate spheres, emphasising women's position and status as confined to the domestic realm. Consequently, the gender order transitioned towards a hierarchical framework, with masculinity assuming a superordinate role over femininity. The shift orchestrated by

18 Interview with Mama Fidelia, 24 October 2021.

colonial institutions and Indonesian state formation effectively reversed the Indigenous system of gender relations, favouring a patriarchal gender hierarchy.

However, in my observations of daily life, I discovered that the domestication of women in Timor has been only partial. Despite the deep distinctions between gender diarchy/hierarchy and housemaster/housewife ideologies, women exhibit skill in adeptly navigating these differences to continue matriliny and the authority of being a housemaster. By maintaining control and power inside the house, women leverage their domestic expertise, particularly in the realm of cooking, as a significant resource for advancing their political agency. These women leaders harness the power of domesticity, with cooking as their form of political activism. They nurture affective connections with other women through their cooking activism, and converting these affective investments into votes during elections. Thus, I propose that domestic spaces serve as a realm where women can acquire political leadership skills. Within these spaces lies the potential for empowerment, fostering the cultivation of affective networks. Therefore, we must not underestimate the role of housewives, as it opens diverse possibilities and opportunities for women.

However, affective relations are not the sole determinant of success in political contests. Connections to the local nobility also hold significant influence over women's electability. The two women I have presented, despite having a strong social identity as housewives, belong to the dominant clan in their respective villages and hail from the noble group of Malaka. Nevertheless, even as noblewomen, they must still engage in the practices of *tanam kaki* and demonstrate their politics of being present. Therefore, the noble position of women must be complemented by affective relations in their pursuit of political agency. Thus, while the position of Timorese women has partially transitioned from housemasters to housewives, they retain the ability to leverage this status by transforming the domestic space into a political realm, thereby converting it into a political resource.

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