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Empty land and cultural land in Timor-Leste resource frontier

Successive governments in Timor-Leste have described the country's southern plains as 'empty land' – wild, uninhabited, and full of economic potential. This frontier ideology, used by Portuguese colonial administrators, now underpins large onshore oil infrastructure development. Residents in affected regions insist, however, that the land is not empty, emphasising its status as 'cultural land'. Hence this lecture develops the argument that the category of 'cultural land' emerged in direct response to land expropriation and dispossession along the south coast. As pressure from the oil project grew and significant compensation was paid to affected residents, 'cultural land' began to take on features similar to the modernist concept of private property. By tracing the recursive interactions between 'empty land' and 'cultural land', this lecture explores how recent notions of 'cultural land' struggle to hold the overlapping and shifting land relations that have shaped people's understandings of land until now.