

MICHAEL ROSE

Indigenous Spirits and Global  
Aspirations in a Southeast Asian  
Borderland

*Timor-Leste's Oecussi Enclave*



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The names of some locations, institutions and people throughout have been changed in order to protect the identity of informants and sacred sites.

Portions of the text have also been used in various journal articles. See individual footnotes for details. Thanks for the input from editors and anonymous reviews.

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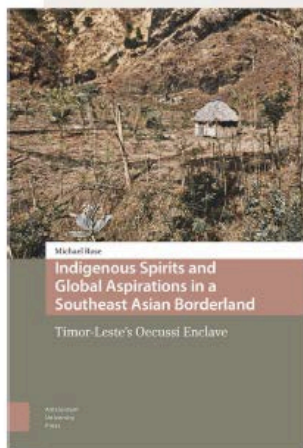
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Michael Rose

## Indigenous Spirits and Global Aspirations in a Southeast Asian Borderland

*Timor-Leste's Oecussi Enclave*

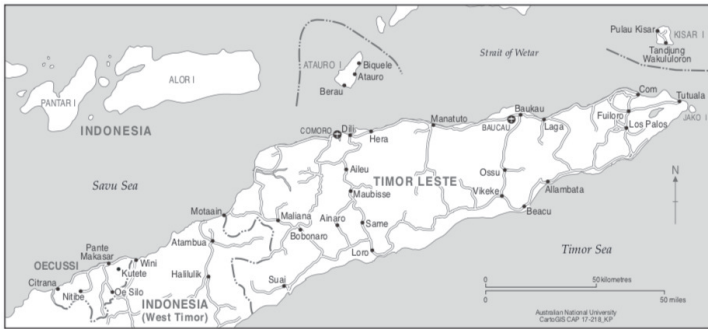
Over the past 40 years, life in Timor-Leste has changed radically. Before 1975 most of the population lived in highland villages, spoke local languages, and rarely used money. Today many have moved to peri-urban lowland settlements, and even those whose lives remain dominated by customary ways understand that those of their children will not. For the Atoni Pah Meto of Timor-Leste's remote Oecussi Enclave, the world was neatly divided into two distinct categories: the *meto* (indigenous), and the *kase* (foreign). Now matters are less clear; the good things of the globalised world are pursued not through rejecting the *meto* ways of the village, or collapsing them into the *kase*, but through continual crossing between them. In this way, the people of Oecussi are able to identify in the struggles of lowland life, the comforting and often decisive presence of familiar highland spirits.



**Dr Michael Rose** is a research fellow at the Australian National University's College of Asia and the Pacific. He is an anthropologist and author with a passion for narrative ethnography and a varied, even colourful, background working jobs in policy, agriculture, international development and education throughout Eurasia and Australia.

# Maps

## Timor-Leste and Oecussi

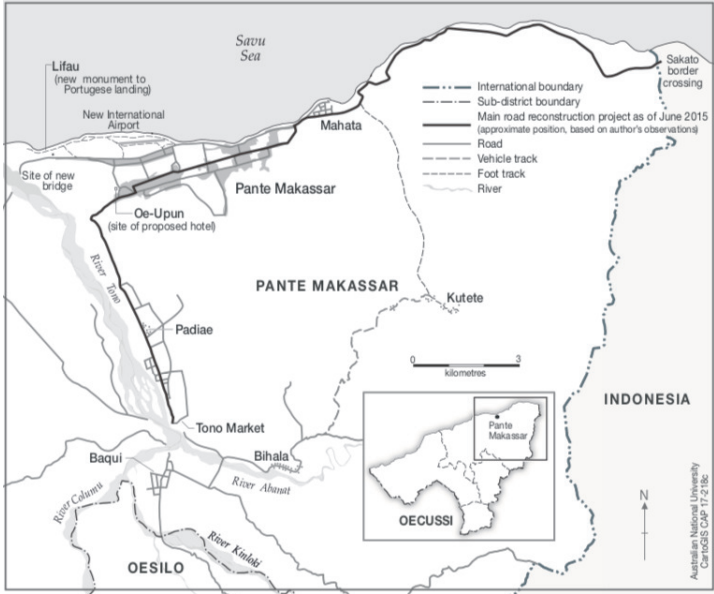


## Oecussi district





## Pante Makassar and Kutete



## A note on language

While in Oecussi, I communicated with people through a combination of Timor-Leste's lingua franca, Tetun, and the more difficult and lesser known Meto.

While it was once little spoken in Oecussi, in the 20 years since the end of Indonesian rule Tetun has replaced Bahasa Indonesia as the enclave's language of public life and it is now understood even in remote areas. In the lowlands it is increasingly used as a first language by children with a parent or schoolmates from elsewhere in Timor.

Meto is the main indigenous language of West Timor. The variety spoken in Oecussi is mutually intelligible with the others. It is sometimes referred to in Portuguese-influenced sources as *Lingua Baikeno*, and by Indonesian sources as *Bahasa Dawan*.

Words in Meto have many different forms according to their environment and grammatical functions. One distinctive feature is metathesis, in which the final consonant-vowel sequence of a word changes position in certain situations. Thus, *fafi* (pig) becomes *faif* in a phrase such as *faif ana'* (piglet), or *nenó* (day) becomes *neon* as in *neon mese'* (Monday). Readers will notice this pattern throughout.

Another important feature of Meto is the glottal stop consonant, which is represented with an apostrophe in Meto words throughout. The glottal stop is a full consonant in Meto just

like any other and its presence or absence is important. A clear example is *mone* (male) without a final glottal stop but *mone'* (outside) with a final glottal stop. The glottal stop can occur word-initially before other consonants (e.g. 'naek = big, great) word-medially (e.g. le'u = sacred), or word-finally (e.g. muti' = white). The only instance in which I do not write the glottal stop is in the word *meto'* (dry, indigenous, familiar), which has a final glottal stop but is written *meto*.

All foreign words are in Meto unless noted otherwise. Tetun words are marked with a 'T'. Indonesian words are marked with an 'I'. Many thanks to star linguist, Owen Edwards, whose work is on nothing less than metathesis in Meto and who kindly assisted me with the Meto language that I have used throughout this text. For more on the linguistics of Meto, see Edwards (2016).



Photo Rui Pinto



Photo Rui Pinto



*photo by Rui Pinto*

# 1

## Chapter 1: Frontiers imagined, frontiers observed

My first encounter with Timor was in a freezing church hall in inner-city Melbourne in 1997. I went there as a sixteen-year-old tutor for St. Vincent de Paul's Friday Night School, a programme intended to get over-privileged private school students like me to teach younger kids from refugee families living in the nearby public housing projects. The children we were tutoring were from an assortment of 1990s warzones – Sudan, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka – but the largest group was from a place called East Timor, a tiny half-island the school atlas showed as part of Indonesia.

These Timorese refugees consisted of several large, visibly struggling families who had escaped in the early 1990s and now lived in high-rise public housing; the sort of place where you would regularly find used syringes in the graffiti-clad lifts and the interior hallways were the same slate grey as the winter sky. Timor, I gathered, was a place with mango trees, warm bucket showers, and cockfights, but from a hall in a housing project mired by Melbourne cold and a heroin

epidemic, it was very hard to imagine. Even with the island embroiled in the bloody final act of what was to be a 24-year struggle for self-determination, we didn't talk much about their homeland. There were things I was curious about: I had heard that Luis, the boy I was tutoring, had survived the 1991 Santa Cruz massacre<sup>1</sup> by diving into a cesspit and hiding there until dark while Indonesian soldiers looked for and executed survivors, but fortunately our supervising teacher<sup>2</sup> was wise enough to tell us not to bring it up. I remember once, when a car backfired outside the hall, seeing Luis jump like he'd stepped on a live wire. Clearly there were places beyond peaceful Melbourne that demanded understanding, and I came away from Friday Night School eager not only for knowledge about this other world, but also to learn how those who had come from it made sense of mine. It was decades later when I started this book, but all that is to come – the stuff about identity as negotiated through movement between the *kase* (foreign/unfamiliar) and the *meto* (indigenous, dry, upland); the 90,000-odd words of personally inflected academic prose; the energy expended obsessing over a distant corner of a tiny country in the Lesser Sunda Islands – goes back to that time.

Movement and change, the connection between where people are and how they belong, had always fascinated me. The idea that, through resettlement, received conditions could be renegotiated was an exciting one and even the alternative – that some aspects of identity were in fact fixed – had a

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<sup>1</sup> In November 1991, Indonesian soldiers opened fire on the funeral procession of murdered independence activist Sebastião Gomes, killing around 270 (Rei 2007, 51).

<sup>2</sup> Thanks, Bill.



certain world-weary glamour. Though there was never the opportunity to travel overseas, even in the sun-baked tomato fields 200 kilometres north of Melbourne where I grew up, there were those who were born of far-off places, and on the issue of belonging they were the ones with stories and things to say. To use a word I learned later, there was something liminal about the way they lived, and that was interesting. Three-fingered Joe spoke of his five-fingered, pre-war youth tickling trout<sup>3</sup> in the crystalline steams of the long-forgotten Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Efi Porcaro's father was so much still in his Sicilian village that he insisted, as a matter of honour, that his daughter be escorted by her little brother whenever off school property. The family doctor known only as BK, whose real name turned out to be Bhupendra Kumar, who was once heard speaking over the phone to his mother in something that might have been Hindi. These people were certainly all part of my small town by the river, but their way of belonging was rarely easy or taken for granted – their presence hinted at questions to be asked, tales to be told, and secrets to be kept.

Years later, during the height of the Pauline- 'we are in

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<sup>3</sup> An ancient method of catching trout in shallow, fast-flowing steams by stealthily creeping up behind the fish and gently rubbing its belly to lull it into a trance before flipping the unfortunate creature up onto the riverbank.

danger of being swamped by Asians’ - Hanson hysteria,<sup>4</sup> I was at school in Melbourne with a boy called Harry Lim, whose origins are most easily glossed as Sino-Vietnamese Australian. Racism was all over the news that year, and I was curious enough to ask him whether he had encountered any. He answered, bemused, that he had not, which was reassuring. Years later, after we graduated, he got into the best law school in Melbourne, and then the best government grad programme in Canberra. One night, while out for a well-deserved drink with the other young achievers, some patriotic gentlemen shoved him over and told him to fuck off back home, by which, presumably, they didn’t mean the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. He lives in Beijing now, and although he has an Australian passport and a mind full of English, no patriotic Chinese gentlemen have ever physically attacked him and told him where to go.

Those questions about place and belonging I had begun asking amid the tomato fields? It turned out they were serious, and while such reflections may well fall within the realm of anecdote, anecdote is essential to the logic of this book because at the heart of how I have deployed the insights of theorists and fieldworkers such as Jackson, Wacquant, Holmes, and Scott to issues of place and identity, is the question of why

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<sup>4</sup> Pauline Hanson is a right-wing populist politician from northern Australia. Though she has never commanded large-scale electoral support, her tendency to use unusually open racist rhetoric has allowed her to benefit from a disproportionate amount of media attention. Her notorious 1996 maiden speech to the national parliament, in which she warned that Australia was ‘in danger of being swamped by Asians’ sparked a long and vociferous national conversation about racism in Australian social and political life.

setting out to do so became a compelling course of action.

Travel and work overseas was another way of looking for answers and starting to understand the stories of those who had come to my town from far away and had previously been beyond comprehension. I didn't realize this at first; I thought that perhaps all my roaming was just a way to look at things and maybe upset my parents. Motion-sick girlfriends also demanded clarity – why did I insist on spending four weeks trying to get from Beijing to Chennai, or Tehran to Lisbon by train and bus, when plane tickets were so cheap? Did I really have to work on a communistic chicken farm in the Negev? What was so bad about pulling pints in a London pub?

But in moving across the surface of the globe, the unnerving reality of imaginary lines became manifest in a way they could never be viewed from the troposphere, and living on fault-lines political, cultural, and geographic, the energizing and important absurdity of borders became inescapable. In Xinjiang, you could sit on the steppe and see both Chinese and Kazak goats (they look the same). In the blooming desert of southern Israel, you could hear both the *muezzin* from the other side of the fence in overcrowded Gaza, and the weed-whacker whine of the little robot plane waiting above to oversee the speedy death of anyone trying to get across without appropriate paperwork. Borders were more distant in the narrow, smoky streets of Kathmandu, but even so there were shops fronted with signs depicting the Sydney Opera House or the Golden Gate Bridge – brokers who would promise to place customers at prestigious universities in wonderful foreign countries where, even if life wasn't exactly perfect, it

was better than in Nepal.<sup>5</sup>

Such experiences revealed more than the quotidian life of checkpoints and their rarely forgotten potential as flashpoints for apocalyptic violence. Also apparent was how manifold and deeply felt borders could be; how essential they were to identities enforced, identities challenged, and identities clung to beyond the limits of reason and life itself. Before travel, borders were mostly about sovereignty, boundaries created by states, and were marked clearly on maps. After travel they were more often about people; manifold lines of the mind which, while perhaps invisible to outsiders, were always implicit in shared webs of meaning that bound and excluded. ‘Whether planned or accidental, desired or dreaded,’ Jackson (2013b, 2) writes, ‘the passage from one place to another, one life stage to another, or one state or status to another, often figures centrally in the stories we tell about our lives and who we are.’

It is this potential of borders, in their broadest sense, to facilitate the transformation of those who travel, that is at the heart of the present study.

## A short of history of a small country

Although this is a book concerned with ‘borders, in their broadest sense’, I pause here before launching into the main

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<sup>5</sup> It would not be going too far to say that my formative reading on the theme of movement as a way of seeking something better, was Theodore Seuss Geisel’s 1965 classic, *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew*. Its furry protagonist leaves behind his home in search of the magical city because he has heard that it’s a place ‘where they never have troubles, or at least very few’.

part of the text to first provide a brief overview of the big ‘H’: Historical circumstances that created the international frontiers within which it is set. There is a large and ever-growing literature on the history and politics of Timor-Leste (see Fernandes 2011, Gunn 2011, and Leach 2017, to name a few choice examples) and rather than trying to repeat what others have done so well elsewhere, my aim here is a short account of the making of Timor-Leste that will help readers who are new to the story make sense of what comes next.

Timor is one of the Lesser Sunda Islands; part of a string that runs east from Java that includes Bali, Flores, and Sumbawa. Volcanic in origin, it is distinguished by high mountains, porous soils that are ill-suited to intensive agriculture (Fox 1988) and coral reefs that teem with an astounding richness of marine life (White et al. 2014). The island’s topography makes for a variety of micro-climates, and although it receives the southern monsoon, its north and west are known for their long dry season and unreliable wet. The people who dominate the island’s west call themselves the Atoni Pah Meto, The People of the Dry Land, and often preface the names of their villages with the word *oe*, which means water. The name of the place that is the focus of this book, the Oecussi (*oe* and *kusi*) enclave means waterpot. In this arid land, fresh water is life, and is valued as such.

The first evidence of humans on Timor dates back to around 40,000 years and the present population is a result of the interaction and intermarriage of groups that have continued to arrive since then (Reepmeyer, O’Connor and Brockwell, 2011). Though their origins are not entirely clear, the presence of both Papuan and Austronesian speakers proves that migrations from both language regions occurred at various times

(McWilliam 2007d). People lived by gardening and foraging in a land that was sparsely enough populated that conflict or local overpopulation could result in a faction branching off in search of territory of its own, and in this way the island was eventually populated. The oral narratives of the Meto, like other Timorese ethno-linguistic groups, often recall a period of wandering<sup>6</sup> (*anao-mnemat*) that is probably traceable to this time. The earliest accounts of the island from Chinese and European sources contain little detail about its inhabitants, but do mention that it was covered with valuable sandalwood trees, much in demand for its fragrant timber, which eventually drew outsiders to its shores (Fox 1988).

The presence of an independent, officially Lusophone<sup>7</sup> state in the east of Timor is the most obvious remnant of what was once a more substantial Portuguese presence throughout Maritime Southeast Asia. Foreigners who study Bahasa Indonesia are often surprised by the number of everyday words that have their origins in Portuguese. Table is *meja* (P: *mesa*), party is *pesta* (P: *feira*) and violin is *biola* (P: *viola*). Portugal was the first European power to establish itself in the Indonesian archipelago during the 16th century and the influence of their language on Malay as it was spoken in its ports and markets is testament to the role of the missionaries and merchants that came with it (Teixeira 1962).

Hägerdal (2012), arguably the preeminent historian of this

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<sup>6</sup> See McWilliam's (2002) *Paths of Origin, Gates of Life*.

<sup>7</sup> See Caffery, Coronado, Hodge and Taylor-Leech (2014, 3). Timor's two official languages are Portuguese and Tetun, with Tetun having now fully emerged as the dominant language of daily life, government, commerce and public discourse. Indonesian and English are sometimes used by businesses, media and NGOs.

period, describes how Portuguese, mostly pursuing spices, sandalwood and souls, arrived in the area in the early 1500s, soon after pioneering the sea route to India, and quickly established an influential network of alliances and strategic outposts spanning from Malacca on the Malay peninsula to the Moluccas just off New Guinea. By the early 17th century their realm had begun a slow decline – its constituent parts acquired by the rival Dutch and British, breaking away in rebellions or just falling into neglect. The islands of what is today Indonesia came under the sway of the Dutch, and in 1859 when Portugal was forced by financial insolvency to cede to them Flores and Solar, Portugal's once expansive presence in the archipelago was reduced largely to the eastern half of the island of Timor (Molnar 2010, 32).

Portuguese sovereignty in Timor was never as settled or consistent as suggested by colonial era maps. It was mediated by shifting alliances with local kingdoms and competition with the Dutch, with the extent of the territory which they claimed as their own at any given time depending on the loyalties of local rulers and imperial negotiations in faraway Europe where parcels of land were exchanged and frontiers moved and contested. Given the lives that have been lost fighting over them in the past 100 years (see Arthur 2019 on the concept of *mate bandeira hun*, 'dying at the base of the flag', in Timorese political discourse) it is sobering to reflect that it was only in 1914 that the current borders were finally settled by a decision of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague (Sowash 1948, 232).

Despite the centuries of bloody feuding over its extent, from a colonial perspective Portuguese Timor was distinguished mostly by being poor and out of the way. As Peake (2013,

19–20) vividly puts it in his 2013 classic, *Beloved Land: Stories, Struggles and Secrets from Timor-Leste*, Portuguese territorial claims to Timor ‘reflected their aspirations on the map rather than the facts on the ground’. He cites a despairing governor, who in 1879 wrote to his superiors lamenting his difficult lot. ‘I have a total of forty-eight Civil and Military officers, of which ten are competent, ten are mediocre, and seventeen are useless.’ Still, although lacking in scope and effectiveness, over the course of centuries Portuguese policies were different enough from those promulgated by the Dutch in their part of Timor to sow the seeds that would eventually sprout into a distinct national identity and an independent state.

The influence of Portuguese rule in shaping Timor-Leste’s linguistic situation was particularly significant in this regard. In the islands of the Netherland’s East Indies, Dutch administrators adopted Malay as a medium of governance. Because of this, for all its many serious internal divisions, when the sprawling colony eventually became the Republic of Indonesia in 1945 it already had a common working language (standardized as Bahasa Indonesia) that would become key to a complicated but encompassing national identity, in which the people of Portuguese Timor pointedly did not share. Although Malay did have some history as a trade language in coastal Timor, from the latter part of the 18th century, it was a Portuguese-influenced variant of a Timorese language, Tetun, that came to serve as the primary means of spoken



communication between its sixteen ethno-linguistic groups<sup>8</sup> (Williams-Van Klinken and Hajek, 2018). Like Indonesian, Tetun is an Austronesian language, but despite some overlap in vocabulary and grammar, they are not mutually intelligible. And although a shared language doesn't necessarily make for a common national destiny, this linguistic difference, which persists to this day, has strengthened Timor-Leste's sense of being distinct from its neighbour.

In Timor, unlike in Lisbon's African colonies, Portuguese was never adopted as a spoken language by the population at large. Though it was used for educational and administrative purposes, most of its people rarely had cause to visit a school or a government post. Portugal was small, its empire spanned the globe and, especially compared to its colonies in Africa, tiny Timor was resource poor and not a priority. By the 1860s, coffee had replaced sandalwood as the colony's most significant export, but the profits were still insignificant compared with those to be had in Portugal's other territories (McWilliam and Shepherd 2013). In stark contrast to many parts of the Netherlands East Indies, cash cropping and plantation agriculture never became dominant, and outside the capital of Dili and a few areas connected to it by road, life revolved around swidden gardening. After Timor was invaded by Indonesia in 1975, the nationalist front that eventually emerged to lead the struggle for freedom called itself the National Council for Maubere Resistance

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<sup>8</sup> The exact number of indigenous languages spoken in Timor-Leste is a matter of some conjecture, the issue being complicated by a paucity of systematic research and unclear definitions of what constitutes a language as opposed to a dialect. The figure I have cited here is from Hull (2002, 381).

(Conselho Nacional da Resistência Maubere)<sup>9</sup> – *Maubere* being a Timorese (specifically a Mambai<sup>10</sup>) word appropriated as a pejorative by the Portuguese to refer to the agriculturalists of the highlands, but reclaimed by the early nationalists as emblematic of the indigenous spirit that defined them and sustained their quest for national self-determination (Ramos-Horta 1987, 37).

In the dramatic year of 1975, with Portuguese colonial rule collapsing and his country facing a highly uncertain future, the man who would eventually become the leader of Timor-Leste's independence movement, Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão (1975, cited in Gusmão & Niner 2000, 35), wrote a poem expressing the spirit of the term:

Maubere People,  
clench your fists,  
The hour is yours, Maubere!  
And your defiance will bring down  
the walls of your own enslavement!

Another aspect of Portuguese rule that proved to be important in the emergence of Timor-Leste as a distinct polity, was the privileged position it accorded to Catholicism. In contrast to the complex situation in the neighbouring Netherlands East Indies/Indonesia<sup>11</sup>, where the Dutch officially endorsed a

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<sup>9</sup> See Cotton (2000, 2–6).

<sup>10</sup> Mambai is the second-biggest indigenous language in Timor (after Meto), spoken across a swath of mountainous country stretching south from the hills outside Dili to the coast.

<sup>11</sup> Aritonang & Steenbrink (2008) provide an excellent overview of this.

number of major religions, in Portuguese Timor Catholicism was the only outside faith allowed to spread<sup>12</sup> and was closely associated with the colonial state. For local rulers who wanted to ally with the Portuguese or individuals who sought to work as colonial functionaries, being baptized was important. Throughout the Portuguese period, local religious practices (sometimes glossed in modern-day Tetun as ‘the rock and the tree’, T: *fatu no ai*) remained the dominant form of spiritual observance, although the Church’s influence, especially through running schools, was significant. In the 1960s and 1970s, former seminarians living in Dili would be critical in building the intellectual foundation of what would eventually become Timor-Leste.

For all its complexities, Timor-Leste’s 1975–1999 fight against Indonesian occupation was fundamentally an existential struggle to preserve the distinct identity that emerged as a result of this long encounter between the indigenous people of Timor and the Portuguese Empire. The identity was Catholic, or at least Catholic influenced, but also encompassed an understanding that the land was inhabited by ancestral and elemental spirits in a way that made matters of geography, history, family, and personal fortune impossible to distinguish. It valued the continued role of the Portuguese language, if only through Tetun, and rejected the hegemony (although not the utility) of Bahasa Indonesia. It recognized the importance of economic development, but not over the imperative for self-determination.

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<sup>12</sup> Under the Portuguese, there were also very small Protestant and Islamic communities. Protestantism centred on the island of Atauro, where it was brought by Dutch missionaries. The Islamic community consisted mostly of the descendants of Arab traders who had settled in Dili.

In 1974–1975, after more than 500 years of existence, the Portuguese empire unexpectedly and definitively came to an end. On 25 April 1974, weary of being sent to die in colonial wars that consumed much of the national budget, a left-wing faction from within Portugal's armed forces toppled the government and quickly declared that Portugal's colonies would be left to go their own way (Ferreira and Marshall, 1986). At the time Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea Bissau were embroiled in bitter independence struggles, but in far-off Timor-Leste the situation was peaceful. Although there had been an armed rebellion as recently as 1959, in 1973 the small circle of young people in Dili who were talking about independence were thinking more about the possibility of a managed transition over a number of years than physical confrontation (Ramos-Horta 1987). The realization that Portugal would be leaving soon, quite possibly without a meaningful period of preparation, spurred the formation of the colony's first political parties. The largest of these, FRETILIN<sup>13</sup>, was a left-wing movement who advocated for social revolution and a clean break with the colonial past. Its smaller rival, UDT<sup>14</sup>, advocated a more conservative approach, including an ongoing relationship with the former colonial power. By August 1975, after a failed attempt at working together ended in an unsuccessful UDT coup, the tiny nation-in-waiting found itself unexpectedly embroiled in a small but vicious civil war (Hoadly 1976).

By the time the fighting ended in September, FRETILIN was

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<sup>13</sup> *Frente Revolucionaria de Timor-Leste Independente/Revolutionary Front of Independent East Timor.*

<sup>14</sup> *Uniao Democratica Timorese/The Timorese Democratic Union.*

in control of the country and what was left of the Portuguese administration had evacuated to the island of Atauro, from where, in December, they would depart forever. As with many of Timor's wars the death toll is unclear – estimates range between 1500 and 3000 (Fernandes, 2012). But despite the restoration of calm domestically, FRETILIN understood that their position was precarious. Important figures within Indonesia's security apparatus and army were pushing for an invasion, and the ascendancy of a left-wing movement, an anathema to both Jakarta's military-dominated Orde Baru (New Order) and its Western backers, swung the argument their way. That this was the same regime that had marked its ascent to power by orchestrating the massacre of half a million people accused of being communists<sup>15</sup> (Melvin 2018) underscored just how serious the situation was. On 28 November 1975, conceding that the Portuguese were not going to return to help manage an orderly decolonization, and that an Indonesian invasion was likely imminent, FRETILIN unilaterally declared the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste.

The Indonesian invasion started in earnest two weeks later, with troops pouring in by land, sea, and air. The rugged terrain of Timor-Leste proved ideally suited to defensive warfare. FRETILIN, despite being vastly outnumbered, was able to hold and administer an ever-shrinking 'free zone' until the end of 1978. The fighting was characterized by overwhelming brutality on the part of the Indonesian Army (Tentara Nasional Indonesia, or TNI) and included deliberately

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<sup>15</sup> An older man I often spoke to in Oecussi had been a member of FRETILIN at the time and was arrested soon after the invasion. He recalled how his captors insisted he admit to being part of the defunct Indonesian Communist Party and viciously beat him when he refused.

induced starvation, the use of aerial bombing (including napalm, cluster bombs and the spraying of defoliants) and the forced resettlement of villages so as to cut the resistance off from any possible support (Fernandes 2015). Working from a range of Portuguese, Indonesian and Church sources, Kiernan (2003) estimates the war caused around 170,000 deaths over its most intense years in the late 1970s and early 1980s – that is to say some 25 per cent of the pre-war population – the majority being civilians who died of disease and starvation. Using data from Indonesia’s Sejora Monument to its war dead, Van Klinken (2005, 121) estimates there were also around 3600 Indonesian combat fatalities, the majority of them also in this period.

Especially throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the military aspect of the occupation ran in parallel with an effort to integrate what Jakarta referred to as Provinsi Timor Timur through what was somewhat euphemistically referred to as ‘development’ (I: *pengembangan*). Hamlets were relocated from remote areas down to newly built roads, where they would not only have access to services such as electricity and piped water but could also be watched closely by the police and army. Schools were built that sought to both promote literacy and indoctrinate a new generation of Timorese children as loyal Indonesian citizens. Family planning initiatives were perceived as intended specifically to reduce the indigenous population (Wallace 2014, 16). In short, there was no clear line between attempts to ‘develop’ ‘Tim Tim’ and control its population (Sherlock 1996). Commenting on the argument that its ungrateful people were eating up more than their fair share of the national economy, in the mid-1990s eminent Indonesian economist Hadi Soesastro (cited in Sherlock 1996,

836) argued that the expense was justified. ‘Development was the key to solving the East Timor Problem,’ he wrote, ‘the principal instrument for integrating East Timor into Indonesia, economically as well as politically’.

Although the fiction that the brutal occupation was actually a ‘return to lap of mother Indonesia’ (Soekanto 1976, preface) never gained widespread credibility, the imposition and eventual adoption of Indonesian logics of governance and development did shape Timor-Leste in ways that continue to be important.

Of particularly lasting impact was Jakarta’s inadvertent role in transforming Catholicism from a faith with which only a minority of the population was formally affiliated<sup>16</sup> to one that is almost ubiquitous. Under Indonesian law every adult citizen must carry an ID card that includes, along with other information, their religious affiliation.<sup>17</sup> From being present but peripheral to the lives of most, the Church quickly became central to most aspects of Timor-Leste’s social and political existence. Compelled to abandon Portuguese as the language of its liturgy, the Church requested and received special dispensation from the Vatican to use Tetun rather than Indonesian instead, effectively making what had once been a utilitarian lingua franca into a national language in waiting. At a time when the rest of the world seemed to have forsaken them, the Church was steadfast in standing by the people of Timor, an ever-present organization with a voice that could not be ignored both domestically and abroad (Hodge 2013).

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<sup>16</sup> Hodge (2013) estimates no more than 30 per cent.

<sup>17</sup> The choices are Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism or Confucianism.

The increasing influence of Catholicism went hand in hand with a suite of reforms that aped those enacted throughout Indonesia decades before. Villages were administratively reorganized as well as physically relocated (Hoadly 1976), with customary authority of local kings (T: *liurai*) replaced by that of a *kepala desa* (village head) who were part of an (admittedly leaky) pipeline of authority and money that went all the way back to Jakarta. The locus of daily governance and spiritual life, once situated in the autonomous highlands, shifted to the *kantor* (I: office) and *gereja* (I: church) along the newly built roads. In this way it was under Indonesia that most people in Timor-Leste had their first and formative experiences of formal education, central governance, church-based worship, and the cash economy. Although Timorese continued to largely reject the Indonesian state, as the occupation wore on they did start to become habituated to and even embrace aspects of what might fairly be described as an Indonesian lifestyle. This is still very much evident today. Throughout this book one of my main concerns is to show in detail how, in Oecussi district, both modes of life (described by my informants as *kase* [foreign] and *meto* [indigenous]) continue to exist and interact.

In 1989 the situation in 'Tim Tim' was declared 'normalized' and the area was opened to foreign visitors and Indonesians alike, but the pretence fooled no one (van Klinken 2005, 114). After the last of their bases was overrun at the end of the 1970s, the armed resistance had reinvented itself as mobile guerrillas, few in number but almost impossible to wipe out completely. They were supported by a growing network of sympathizers in the towns, the *frente klandistina*. People tell stories of how four-year-olds were coached to toddle up to Javanese policemen



and ask them ‘*kapan kamu pulang?*’ (I: ‘When are you going home?’). Timorese youth on scholarships in Indonesia, far from being won over, held nationalist meetings and raised their flag. Throughout the world, but especially in Portugal and Australia, Timor-Leste’s exiles and supporters continued to advocate for the cause, with regular pickets out the front of Indonesian consulates. Beyond Timor, however, the cause was rarely one that compelled the attention of the public and there were times when things seemed hopeless.

Like that of the Portuguese, the end of the Indonesian empire in Timor-Leste was sudden and violent. The massacre that my friend Luis survived on 12 November 1991 at Santa Cruz Cemetery in Dili was a turning point. There had been massacres before— as mentioned above, one way or another perhaps a quarter of the population died due to the invasion, but this time there were around ten foreign activists and journalists present, their cameras rolling. One, a student journalist from New Zealand, was shot and killed but another managed to hide his film in a grave before his equipment was seized. It was later retrieved and smuggled out (Braithwaite, Charlesworth, Soares 2012, 79–84). Current Indonesian defence minister, Prabowo Subianto, a high-ranking military officer with a long, brutal history of service in Timor<sup>18</sup> was quite upset by the PR implications.

‘You don’t massacre civilians in front of the world press,’ he told a journalist. ‘Maybe commanders do it in villages where no one will ever know, but not in the provincial capital [...] It killed us politically, it was the defeat’ (Nairn 2014).

And yet, it was unclear at first that even such graphic

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<sup>18</sup> See van Klinken (2014).

evidence of what was going on in Timor would make a difference. Certainly the horrifying images did spark a surge in international support for Timor-Leste's cause, but not enough to have an appreciable effect on Indonesian policy. The Australian foreign minister Gareth Evans<sup>19</sup>, a supporter of Indonesia's presence, wrote the incident off as an 'aberration'. A year later the leader of the resistance, Xanana Gusmão, was arrested and sentenced to 20 years in prison. But just as he had done when hiding in the jungle, many of the letters and tapes he had smuggled from his prison cell were signed off with the slogan 'to resist is to win' (Gusmão & Niner 2000).

For Timor-Leste, 1998 was the year when, as Pat Walsh (2019), memorably paraphrasing Irish poet Seamas Heaney, put it: 'hope and history rhymed'. A financial panic that began in Thailand quickly spread across the region, including to Indonesia where it led to hyperinflation, rioting, and the end of President Suharto's 33 years of iron-fisted rule. That December, seeing the change as an opportunity to address the festering issue of Timor-Leste, Australia's Prime Minister John Howard wrote to Suharto's successor, B.J. Habibie. In his letter Prime Minister Howard reiterated his support for Indonesian control of Timor-Leste, but suggested that the issue needed to be addressed. He cited the French approach to New Caledonia, in which the colony was granted a decade-long autonomy package replete with generous aid and political concessions followed by a confirmatory referendum in which independence was an option, as a potential model. Irritated

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<sup>19</sup> In 2017 the same man, serving as the Chancellor of ANU, handed me my PhD. 'Dr. Rose, that sounds all right now, doesn't it?' he said as he shook my hand. I had some notion of responding with something snide, but in the end just gratefully accepted the diploma.

by the comparison of his republic (founded in a fiery surge of anti-colonial rhetoric) to a European imperial power, Habibie surprised everyone by quickly moving to organize a UN-supervised 'popular consultation' on independence scheduled not for a decade hence, but for 30 August 1999 (Braithwaite, Charlesworth, Soares 2012, 91–94).

The months leading up to the vote were fraught. Unhappy with the decision of their interim president and operating at a time of disorientating political uncertainty in their own country, the Indonesian army started to sponsor and train a number of pro-independence militia groups. Even with the arrival of international election monitors, including a contingent of unarmed police, campaigning was marred by ongoing violence by militia, including the massacre of as many as 60 people at a church in the town of Liquisa in April (Kent 2008, 16). If the intimidation was intended to keep people away from the polling booths or coerce them into voting against independence, it failed. There was an almost full turnout, and 78.5 per cent of people voted for independence. The people of Timor-Leste had expressed their will.

The systematic campaign of murder and arson that followed the announcement of the poll results is sometimes described as a rampage, although it is clear that much of it was carefully planned and facilitated by elements within the Indonesian armed forces (Nevins, 2005). While President Habibie had committed to maintaining security in the lead-up to and after the ballot and its aftermath, clearly many of his soldiers disagreed with him and did nothing to stop the militia they had created in their reign of terror. It was only through intense international pressure and a final burst of lobbying on the part of Timor-Leste's exiled leaders that Indonesia allowed

an Australian-led peacekeeping force to deploy. Arriving in Dili on 20 September 1999, they slowly spread out through the rest of the country, finally reaching Oecussi a month later. By the time calm had been restored, the population had been displaced (250,000 of them externally to Indonesia) the buildings torched, the livestock slaughtered or stolen, and 1400 people killed (Robinson 2003). Formal independence wouldn't arrive until May 2002, but after 500 years Timor-Leste, liberated from those who would tell them who they were and how to live, was free to find its own path.

Having secured its external boundaries, Timor-Leste could now turn to the task of contemplating the frontiers within.

### Life between lines: an outline of Oecussi

It is telling that perhaps the best-known novel of Timor-Leste is entitled *The Crossing*. Exiled in Portugal, Luis Cardoso (2002) writes of Timorese life as being defined by movement and dislocation, and while the book is mostly set in the 1960s, its tale of lives lived between realms spiritual and geographic is strikingly relevant to an exploration of the liminal nature of life in Timor today.

Cardoso's characters are *assimilados*, members of the small class of Timorese who by dint of attaining a Portuguese education and becoming Catholics found work as minor functionaries within the colonial regime. The central protagonist is a district medic in the service of the Portuguese state who gets around the rugged hills on a Timorese pony and wields not only a fearsome 1950s-issue glass syringe, but also a mastery of Maritime Southeast Asia's mystical martial art, *silat*— an individual who has 'added to his skills that of medicine man

for those illnesses beyond the reach of penicillin' (Cardoso, 9). Sent to study in Dili's government high school, the medic's son begins to run with the city's small and decidedly impious crowd of ex-seminarians (doomed, many of them, to exile, death or treachery), who gather by the seafront to drink, ogle young Australian tourists, and talk politics.

'Nothing that went on abroad escaped our notice' (72) writes Cardoso, but despite being drawn to the city by the allure of the foreign, their understanding of life beyond Timor is limited, and the idea that the outside world might be dangerous, or that their ultimate encounter with it would be violent and scatter them to the winds, doesn't really occur to them. Their status with regards to the colonizers is something they see clearly, never forgetting that despite the bell-bottoms and office jobs it is the freedom to return to the hills, an 'eternal fall back' (54) where they can count on finding food and family, that makes city lives possible. The tragedy masterfully explored in *The Crossing* is thus not just a narrative of exile, but of journeys disrupted; of a people with identities and livelihoods often demonstrably vested in the liminal brought under the control of states necessarily obsessed with spatial categories. Village or city? Living or dead? Portuguese, Indonesian, or Timorese? Catholic or animist? Past or present? In the Timorese worlds described by Cardoso, and observed by me

and others, the answers are not simple.<sup>20</sup> And yet to the colonial authorities of occupied Dili and faraway Lisbon a simple answer is unavoidable. The old medic ends up in Portugal where, demented with the impossibility of returning home, he is found wandering the streets of Lisbon<sup>21</sup>, believing he is on his way to visit a relative on the south coast of Timor (though he is puzzled by the proliferation of *malae*<sup>22</sup>). On bringing him home, the police say it's not their job to rescue people lost in time.

The liminal nature of Timorese lifeworlds evokes phenomenologist Michael Jackson's notion of the *limitrophe* (2015). A Latin word adopted into French as a way of describing the area between two nation states, Jackson uses it to discuss the power of the spaces beyond things 'enshrined in received ideas of truth and reality' (6) to act as sites of social production. While such a perspective would at first seem an ideal one from which to explore life in Oecussi, the task of identifying the boundaries

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<sup>20</sup> Kidder (2003) describes a situation in Haiti that exemplifies how belief in the agency of spirits does not always imply disbelief in the utility of bio-medical systems. An elderly patient informs a foreign doctor, Paul Farmer, that she plans to seek revenge on the witch who sickened her. 'But if you believe that [the witch sickened you],' he cries, 'why did you take your medicines?' 'Cheri,' she says, 'eske-w pa ka konprann bagay kipa senp?' The Creole phrase *pa senp?* means 'not simple,' and implies that a thing is fraught with complexity, usually of a magical sort. So, in free translation, she said to Farmer, 'Honey, are you incapable of complexity?' (35).

<sup>21</sup> The father of one of the families of Timorese refugees I tutored throughout 1997 and 1998 met a comparable fate. Though his many kids adapted quickly, he was unable to cope with the death of his wife, nor the cold and the unfamiliar environment/language. He lost his mind and was sometimes found on the streets of East Melbourne in a similarly confused state.

<sup>22</sup> T: foreigners.

that are used to frame day-to-day life is not a straightforward one.

The most obvious border in Oecussi is the international one that sets it apart from Indonesia. One of thirteen districts of Timor-Leste, it is detached from the rest of the country by some 80 kilometres of Indonesian territory. A belief that the Portuguese landed here in 1515 has become a staple of Timor-Leste's historical narrative, but this date appears to be supported by scant documentary evidence. Rather, the date 24 August 1515 can be traced to a plaque in Roman numerals on a monument to the landing that the Portuguese government erected in 1974 (Da Fonseca, 2005), but, it seems, no further. Drawing on a map from the period, eminent Portuguese historian Damião Peres posits that Timor was known to his compatriots from 1512, a date that strongly suggests a landing on the island by the explorer António Abreu, who is known to have sailed through the area on a voyage he made immediately after the Portuguese conquest of Malacca in search of the fabled spice islands (Peres 1960, cited in Bernardino 1984, 76). Whatever the nature of initial contact with the Portuguese, by 1702 the village of Lifau, near the mouth of the river (*noel*) Tono, was host to a Portuguese governor (Hägerdal, 2012, 316).

Around this time, Lifau was a rough port used for the extraction of sandalwood, slaves, and honey. Effective control over these resources was the cause of bloody and protracted intrigue between several rival Eurasian groups known as Topasses or, more pejoratively, Black Portuguese. Even then, the tendency of many Timorese to live across rather than within outwardly comprehensible binary categories was evident to visitors. Hägerdal cites the English privateer William Dampier, who during the early 18th century visited

Lifau and described how, despite evoking the authority of Lisbon, the Topasses did whatever they wanted (192). Conflict among the Topasses, the Dutch, and the Portuguese was intractable enough that one night in 1769 the Portuguese governor, under siege by Eurasian clans that swore loyalty to his king, had anything movable loaded onto boats, anything else set on fire and by dawn was sailing east in search of a new capital, which he eventually found in the place now known as Dili (397).<sup>23</sup>

How Oecussi remained a nominal part of the Portuguese empire even after its governor set it on fire, and the warlord who took it over and apparently offered it to the Dutch (397) is beyond the scope of this book.<sup>24</sup> *Needless to say, the monument at the purported landing site stating aqui tambem e Portugal ('here too is Portugal') is a vast oversimplification. Despite this claim, and probably in part because of their genuine devotion to Catholicism, Oecussi's lowland clans never completely abandoned their outward loyalty to the Portuguese flag, and right up until the Indonesian invasion of 1975 it was (in theory) governed from Dili.*

To date, much of the literature on Oecussi has focused on the political and ecological consequences of this colonial

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<sup>23</sup> While this incident is not widely known by the population at large (see Chapter 3 for an alternative indigenous account that has more currency), it is worth considering if only for its haunting parallel with the events that transpired 230 years later in 1999, when the Indonesian government also looted and burned the enclave before abandoning it. Though well known for their fierce resistance to the Indonesian occupation of 1975 to 1999, both cases dramatically illustrate why, over the centuries, Timorese peoples including the Meto also often sought to accommodate or avoid foreign rulers rather than confront them.

<sup>24</sup> See instead Meitzner Yoder (2016a).



encounter: studies of a syncretic society at once set apart from its neighbours by their ostensible allegiance to the Portuguese empire, and connected to them through Southeast Asian trade networks and their common Austronesian heritage. In 1947, Charles Boxer drew upon his work in European colonial archives to write *The Topasses of Timor*, a comprehensive if Eurocentric summary of Oecussi's coastal clans and their cosmopolitan origins. Sixty years later, Meitzner Yoder (2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2011a, 2011b, 2015, 2016a) approached the topic from an environmental studies perspective, undertaking fieldwork in the district, and focusing on the political ecology of state and customary entities in resource extraction in which authority structures related to the Topass clans described by Boxer played a central role. Hägerdal's *Lords of the Land, Lords of the Sea* (2012), a comprehensive account of colonial rivalries on western Timor, sets out the emergence of Oecussi as a distinct political entity as a result of the often vicious interplay among Dutch, Portuguese, and Timorese interests.

While such research has successfully explored the socio-political shape of life in Oecussi, especially its connection with the broader literature on eastern Indonesia, it has tended to focus more on the perspective of lowland dwellers than their less accessible upland compatriots.<sup>25</sup> This book extends the work of my forebears by turning its focus to the lives of the enclave's mountain folk, a task that takes on particular

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<sup>25</sup> The major exception to this is the work of Laura Meitzner Yoder. Her research focused on the interplay between customary forms of governance and emerging state institutions in the early 2000s. The resulting thesis (2005) formed the basis for numerous articles, which I cite throughout this text. Also worthy of note is the work of Victoria Sakti (2012, 2013), who wrote about the upland village of Passabe.

importance given that they, like so many others in the lower-income world, are finding themselves engaged with the global in new and unfamiliar ways. Although highland and lowland life continues to be distinct, what is unprecedented is the large-scale settlement of highlanders (*atoin nu'af*) in lowland areas, where government control and the cash economy are strong. One apt theoretical response to this in other parts of Timor is the notion of 'cohabitation', developed in the essays brought together in Susana da Matos Viegas and Rui Graça Feijó's edited volume *Transformations in Independent Timor-Leste* (2017). While this terminology is not something I have drawn upon in writing this book, the notion, neatly defined by Brown and Grenfell (2017, 175) as 'the coexistence of entanglement of profoundly different, often incommensurate ways of being in the world' (175), is one that is clearly congruent with this work.

In Oecussi the work of 'crossing' between the *kase* and *meto* realms has emerged as a defining factor in personal and group identities, and often also in day-to-day life. This conceptual and physical space between the highland village and the lowland town, a *limitrophe* to use Jackson's (2005) term for it, has become a site of reflexive encounter and adaption, where ambitions tied to success in the outside world may be pursued through social and spiritual frameworks with their origins in the hills. At the same time, those frameworks are transformed by their appropriation of outside technologies and sources of power. Though not always immediately visible to outsiders, this process is central to understanding the nature of life as it is lived in Oecussi today.

## The kase, the meto, and the threefold division of indigenous life in Oecussi

My informants believed that long ago (*un-unu'*), Timor fell under the domain of four kings (*usi'*). Although the boundaries of their kingdoms were ill-defined, Sonba'i Sila was said to have ruled the west around Kupang; Amfoan Sila the centre; and Liurai Sila most of what is today Timor-Leste. The domain of the fourth king was the 800-square kilometres of rugged mountains and valleys in the island's north-west coast corresponding to what is today Oecussi district.<sup>26</sup> This king's name was Benu Sila, although his people usually called him Ama (Father) Benu and referred to themselves as his 'tame birds, tame chickens' (*kool aem, maun aem*). Today most maps label his former domain as Oecussi<sup>27</sup>, but Ambenu is still the name used by those who live there.

Custodianship of the enclave's oral history is the preserve of specialists. When asked about many aspects of the past, people would tell me apologetically it was not their place to speak of such things, and it was widely believed that watchful ancestral spirits would cause those speaking out of turn to *hetan disastre* (*T: find disaster*). The question of what united the district's eighteen *suko* was not one of these issues. Even

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<sup>26</sup> 'Oecussi' is the spelling I use in this book, if only because it is the spelling the UN used when I first lived there in 2011. There are many other accepted variations. The name is a combination of two Meto words, *oe* – meaning water, and *kusi* – meaning pot, and was said to have originally referred to a place near the mouth of the River Tono with a reliable spring that was often used by visiting seafarers.

<sup>27</sup> The Indonesian government referred to the area as Kabupaten Oe-kusi Ambeno.

older people with a nostalgic sympathy for the Portuguese were adamant that through their allegiance to Ama Benu they had been united long before the colonizers arrived. People also spoke of 1912, when his spiritual successor, Usi Joao Da Cruz Sila, had called on the enclave's people to rise up against the Europeans and they had, for a time, been close to driving them out. Even after 400 years of European hegemony, it was the Ambenu line to which the district's *suko* were loyal, and to this day the Christian title of the *usi* is appended with a reminder of Ama Benu Sila's authority. After the rebellion, the Portuguese selected some merchants from a relatively compliant clan called Da Costa, centuries-long rivals of the Da Cruz, to replace them and installed them in a large mansion by the coast where they could be closely watched. The current pretender to the kingship is a man called Antonio Da Costa Sila. While the state of Timor-Leste dates Oecussi's political difference from the first Portuguese landing<sup>28</sup>, at least for the mountain-dwelling population it was always their devotion to Ama Benu Sila, 'the one who wears the crown (*pilu*)' and holds the sceptre' (*tuaf le' mele es antao uisf aa in pilu*, *in es anhuuk uisf aa in uel*), that sets them apart from their neighbours.

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<sup>28</sup> In 2015 and 2016, the perceived failure of the state to recognize Oecussi's unique identity was the cause of tensions. To commemorate the 500th anniversary of the arrival of the European colonizers, the national government commissioned a Portuguese artist to cast a number of bronze statues depicting first contact between the Timorese and their soon-to-be rulers. When the statues were unveiled, local elders were horrified to see that they were wearing feather headdresses and footwear characteristic of central Timor, not Oecussi. While visiting foreigners and Dili dignitaries either didn't notice or saw this as a trifling issue, for many people in Oecussi the statues were both insulting and left them open to retribution from ancestral spirits who demand that history be told accurately.

Oecussi is unique within Timor-Leste in that its indigenous population comprises entirely a single ethno-linguistic group, the Atoni Pah Meto.<sup>29</sup> In contrast to the linguistic diversity of the eastern side of the island, the western half, including Oecussi, is dominated by the Meto, whose common language forms the basis of an identity that transcends national borders. A noticeably patriotic place (flags on front fences and adorning nativity scenes), people still maintain a sense that they are different from their compatriots. In everyday speech, easterners are referred to (usually affectionately) as *atoin belus* (*people of Belu*), a term that refers to the Tetun-speaking Belu people of the old kingdom of Wewiku-Wehali on Timor's South Coast. Far from separating them from their compatriots in the east<sup>30</sup>, my informants explained to me that their unique ethno-history actually strengthened their identity as citizens of Timor-Leste. In Dili and beyond, they said, the Meto of Oecussi were respected and sometimes even feared for their influence with sacred (*T: lulik*) forces, a result of both the inspirited nature of their wild and roadless mountains (*pah fui*), and their status in Timorese folklore as *rai santo* (*holy land*) where the first Catholic missionaries came ashore. Only half-jokingly I was told to watch myself with Oecussi women, as if scorned they could use spells to cause a man's penis to

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<sup>29</sup> Indonesian sources sometimes refer to the Meto as the 'Dawan' while Portuguese-influenced sources know them as the 'Baikeno'. Both terms are exonyms of unclear origin.

<sup>30</sup> It is worth noting that the east-west ethno-linguistic division discussed here appears to be entirely distinct from the Loro-sa'e-Loro-monu (east-west) dispute of 2006, which arose from a perception that soldiers from the eastern part of the country were being favoured for promotion within the new national army (see McWilliam 2007a for further details).

drop off. The power of Oecussi's magic and prayer was not only a hazard for would-be philanderers. Some people would say that Oecussi was peripheral to the national struggle, but my informants warned that such assertions came from *beik teen* (T: dumb shits). The truth was, they told me, that without Meto prayers and *adat rituals*<sup>31</sup> attaining independence would have been impossible.

For all this, there are signs that, at least among the young and urban, the sense of Meto difference is diminishing. While an awareness of Oecussi as united by its connection with Ama Benu, and set apart by the unique gravity of its spiritual complex persists, identities tied to the state have become increasingly important. The nationalist narrative taught in schools traces the origins of the state to colonialism rather than pre-modern kingship (Leach, 2015), and the slogan *Timor ida deit* (*Timor is one!*) found daubed on walls all over the country is an example of how the state is at pains to promote national identity ahead of ethnic affiliation. Despite this, the people of Oecussi have a third way of categorizing the world that has only become significant in recent times: the distinction between that which is *kase* (foreign) and that which is *meto* (indigenous/familiar).

Here the word *meto* is used in a different sense to its name for the West Timorese ethnic group. Literally meaning dry, it is also used to denote those who live as swidden farmers in the often arid highlands, as opposed to the more

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<sup>31</sup> Oecussi's indigenous religion revolves around ongoing contact with watchful ancestor spirits who are contacted through ritual speech, and divination undertaken at sacred sites (*bale le'u*) and clan houses (*uem le'u*). As with indigenous religious practices across Timor, it is frequently referred to using the Indonesian loanword, *adat*.

urbanized population, especially those who have found work in offices who are called *kase* (foreign). As a noun, it is usually translated as ‘foreigner’ and sometimes it does carry that explicit meaning (I was usually referred to as *kaes muti* – the white foreigner) although a better rendering might be ‘foreign to the hills of Timor’ or even ‘foreign to the village’. Together, the *kase* and *meto* form a set that is used to contrast practices and things considered characteristic of Timorese highland and lowland life (*amnemat*). Swidden farming is *meto*; wet rice farming is *kase*. Divination and animism are *meto*, church-based worship is *kase*. Ritual speech is *meto*, book learning is *kase*. Older villagers who never went to school, use this distinction to understand why their grandchildren were attending classes. In ritual speech, they refer to the children as writing masters or drawing masters (*akluust ini, akaels ini*), who through education will ‘become as the foreigners’ (*esan kaesn ini*) and move to the lowlands where the security of good paper (*sura alekot*) (that is to say, sedentary office work) and *posta alekot* (good government posts) are available.

This *kase/meto* dichotomy sits neatly within a tendency long recognized as pervasive throughout the Pacific and Maritime Southeast Asia ‘to accept both indigenous and exogenous elements as constituting their culture’ (Jolly 1992). Writing on Polynesia, Sahlins famously coined the term ‘stranger-king’ to characterize how the region’s cosmologies of governance have often accommodated or embraced the temporal authority of a colonial ‘stranger’ whose power, though significant, is enabled by the spiritual precedence of their indigenous hosts (1985, 78). Discussing the legacy of his thinking in 2012 (135) Sahlins identifies James Fox (1995a, 1995b, 2006b)

and Schulte Nordholt (1971) as having been at the forefront of applying this perspective to the exploration of Timorese political and religious systems. Cunningham, also writing on Timor in this vein, described *Meto* political systems as tending to evidence ‘complementary dualism’ (1965, 379), that is to say as polities where spiritual and temporal authority are vested in separate figures who are mutually supportive, but nonetheless define themselves by recourse to separate origin stories. Drawing on Cunningham to describe the political organization of the West Timorese domain of Insana just south of Oecussi, Schulte Nordholt attests to the presence of a similar dichotomy among the *Meto*. There, he writes, the lineage with responsibility for presenting harvest gifts is considered to be fathers (*amaf*) in relation to the tribute takers, who are symbolically their children (*ana*)’ (Schulte Nordholt 1971, 187).

The takeaway from all this, especially for those coming from a background where engagement with development discourses is hard to avoid (Ziai, 2013), is that it is important to be mindful of not configuring the Oecussi’s trajectory as one characterized by ‘progress’ away from the ‘undeveloped’ *meto* mountain past and towards a ‘developed’ *kase* future.

This is not to say that hill folk don’t desire the things of the outside world and hope that they will be able to access them in the future, but rather that attaining them is not a matter of moving away from the *meto* or towards the *kase*, but negotiating spiritual and physical paths between them, expressive of an ontology of relatedness and mobility. The overt dominance of the *kase* world is understood to be enabled by the support of ever-present but typically invisible *meto*. A successful life demands ongoing interaction with both. My focus here is how, in differing ways and degrees,



the practice of life in Oecussi is something that emerges from the contingencies of this ‘crossing’, from movement between a highland space where *meto* matters and revolves around ritual/family/duty/agriculture that are imperative, and a lowland domain where money and outwardly orientated aspirations have become dominant in day-to-day life. I aim to show how, even for those children who succeed in doing as the ritual speakers exhort them and find ‘good paper’ and ‘good posts’, their health and fortune is still usually perceived as contingent on their relationship with networks of spirits, people, and sacred places lodged in the *meto* world of the hills.<sup>32</sup>

### Urban highlanders: movement and authority in Oecussi

None of this should be read as implying that up until recent decades *Meto* villages existed in a state of complete isolation, or that their lifeworlds were settled or uncontested. Fox (1988) sets out in detail how the arrival of new crops, weapons and religious ideas in West Timor was the impetus for changes that reverberated even in remote villages. These changes, however, came relatively slowly and were usually mediated through the background of the *Meto* as animists and agriculturalists.

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<sup>32</sup> The only other explicit discussion of this dynamic in literature in a contemporary context appears to be a single article by Gabriel Faimau (2009) published by the *Interdisciplinary Journal of NTT Development Studies*. Writing of Indonesian Timor rather than Oecussi, Faimau notes that West Timorese highlanders consciously aspire to a *kase* lifestyle, although he does not mention the perceived significance of *meto* ritual as a way of attaining and maintaining it. This may reflect the generally lesser importance of *adat* in present-day Indonesian Timor as compared to Oecussi.

Like elsewhere in Southeast Asia, it is only recently that widespread urban–rural mobility has become important. Until 1975, the highland population lived almost exclusively in small hamlets (*kuan*) where they raised corn (*pena*'), dry-land rice (*ane*) and tubers (*lole*) in swidden gardens (*lele*). *Kuan* were grouped together in semi-independent political and ritual domains known as *suko*, which were ruled through a dual system with a hereditary prince<sup>33</sup> (*naijuuf*) supported by up to three hereditary 'priests' (*tobe*) with responsibility for the management of land and forests, notably the cycle of harvest rituals.

Most *suko* were home to up to eight or nine patrilineal clans (*kanaf*), each of which held a distinct part in the village's ritual and political life, and maintained separate 'sacred houses' (*uem le'u*).<sup>34</sup> The descendants of the original inhabitants are often afforded special status due to their perceived connection with the spirits of the land. In the mountains of Oecussi, where food insecurity is still a reality, maintaining a good relationship with these spirits can be a matter of life and death.

There are a number of explanations for the enduring distinctiveness of the highland and lowland populations. Al-

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<sup>33</sup> There is no completely faithful way to translate Meto political and spiritual terms into English, and in doing so I have tried to follow the example of Cunningham in his classic thesis submitted in 1962 at Oxford, 'The People of the Dry Land'.

<sup>34</sup> Kutete village, for example, consisted of Lasi (*naijuuf*); Koa (*mafefa*'), the *naijuuf*'s assistants and spokesmen); Eko (*naijuuf nasi*'), the old princes, having been deposed by the Lasi long ago); Bana (believed to be the first family in Kutete); the *tobe* 'na'ek, or great priests; Kolo (*tobe ana*'), little priests); the Kebo (*tobe tornene*, 'harvest' priests believed to be instrumental in mediating with the ancestors for good weather); Keno; Elu; Falo and Seo.

though the form of Portuguese rule varied greatly over the centuries in Oecussi, it was generally brutal and exploitative. As throughout the rest of Timor, the Portuguese or their agents took slaves, sandalwood and corvée labour from the hill folk and, although Meitzner Yoder (2011a) shows how elements of this extraction became somewhat normalized through incorporation into the feudal relationship between the *usi*' on the coast and the *naijuuf* in the hills, non-compliance could result in the lowlanders simply taking what they wanted by force. Today the elders of highland clans remember how their grandfathers exchanged gunfire (T: *tiru malu*) with the *kaes muti*' (the white foreigners) and their Timorese allies when

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Following McWilliam (2006, 103), I have rendered the Meto word *kanaf* into English as clan. It is worth noting here that although the term was still widely understood, as a way of referring to a family it appears to be falling out of everyday use. Asked what *kanaf* they were from (*hit kanak sa?*) younger informants sometimes looked confused, a situation quickly resolved when I substituted the term with the Indonesian loanword, *fam*. It was explained to me that this shift had only occurred since the mid-1970s. Today the term *kanaf* appears to have acquired a higher tone, generally referring to a dispersed social grouping defined by common genealogy rather than a common last name or shared domestic arrangements. Such *kanaf* have multiple sub-branches and a sense of precedence/lineage that is typically expressed through botanical metaphor, most often that of the 'tip and trunk' (see McWilliam 2009). Each group within a *kanaf* that has split off and established its own sacred house (*uem le'u*) is seen as a 'branch' stemming from an original legendary 'trunk'. Prior to the mid-1970s, expansion of this method appears to have been the primary conceptual resource through which people ordered their domestic lives throughout Timor, and was noted as such by most early ethnographers of the island including Forman (1980), Traube (1986) and Graham (1991). The partial replacement of the word *kanaf* with *fam* in daily speech appears to be at least in part attributable to the need for Meto to render their family life comprehensible to the bureaucratic state.

they came to steal sandalwood (*nabaak hau meni*).

For the highlanders of Oecussi, it was often safer to simply stay out of reach than risk confrontation. European imperialists were not the only hazard associated with the sea. The lowlands of Oecussi are malarial and highlanders travelling there frequently became sick and died, something that they usually attributed to malevolent spirits and which made many people too scared to come down to the coast. Finally, for all but the most adventurous individuals, there was little in the small Eurasian outpost in the lowlands to draw them in. In 1975, after 500 years of varying degrees of Portuguese control, there was no substantial urban settlement in Oecussi, just a *villa*, a compact colonial outpost consisting of a barracks, a pier, a convent, a school, a police station, a hospital, a jail, a church, administrative offices, and a scattering of shops run by Chinese traders. It was a place of extraction, defence, and exclusion from where an unquestionably lackadaisical ‘civilizing’ mission was projected and the putative civilizers felt relatively safe. They had a word for the natives welcome there: *assimilados*.

‘Urban’ Oecussi appeared after the Indonesians annexed the area in 1975. The town, the only substantial settlement in the enclave, is called Pante Makassar (beach of the Makassarese) after the sailors from Sulawesi who once made their camp there. People sometimes refer to the newer parts of Pante Makassar and similar urban areas throughout Timor as a *kota baru* (I: new town), a distinct concept from a *villa*. At the time of my main fieldwork from 2014 to 2016, the town was a low-density sprawl of Indonesian-style houses of concrete and tin (*uem kase*) strung along a broad grid of once-sealed tracks running west through the hot flats and wet rice fields

– dusty in the dry and submerged under a slurry of sewerage and trash in the wet. In outlying areas, the Indonesian-era water system had stopped functioning (no one could give me a straight story on why it hadn't been repaired) and people usually drew water from salty roadside wells. In the centre of town there were a few relatively built up streets with stores owned mostly by Timorese Chinese merchants and a market with vegetables and meat held once a week. Wary of hill dwellers with their unsettling and potentially disruptive skill at not being governed, resettlement in places like this was a way for the Indonesian state to make citizens out of people whose isolation and subsistence lifestyle had previously kept them beyond reach.

In their nuanced and detailed ethnographies detailing the contact between swidden farmers and sedentary authority, scholars such as Murray Li (2014), Scott (2009) and Graeber (2007) have noted how the advent of assertive postcolonial regimes, replete with their ideologies of inclusive nationalism, have complicated the highland/lowland encounter. In Oecussi, as in Kalimantan, the Southeast Asian Massif, and Madagascar, the colonial regime was largely concerned with extraction. While feared for their violence and strangeness, the Europeans were easily enough avoided, and never part of everyday village life. And whatever might be said about the extent of its territorial possessions, the Meto imagination was not territory that the Portuguese controlled. Under Jakarta things were different. While the army and police were widely loathed for their brutality and corruption, integration into the Indonesian economy and state brought the opportunity to participate in, and covet, the possibilities offered by what Appadurai (1996, 5) calls 'a plurality of imagined worlds'. After 1975,

large numbers of highlanders began to settle in the urban area for the first time, attend school, and learn a widely spoken language. Some found success and even a modest degree of wealth working for the Indonesian government. These circumscribed dreams of Indonesian life – rupiah in the pocket, a tin roof, a motor scooter, visiting a big city, not having to live with the fear of starvation during dry years, all proved magnetic.

Throughout Indonesian rule, Oecussi's urban and semi-urban population expanded dramatically. Swidden farmers became wet-rice farmers and even fishermen. Thousands of people who had been born into the *meto* life grew up living a mostly *kase* one. When in 1999 virtually the entire non-Timorese population was forced to flee, Pante Makassar suddenly and unexpectedly became something that had never existed before – a lowland settlement made up almost entirely of *Meto* highlanders. Clan networks that once revolved around remote villages now became partially urbanized. Inter-*suko* struggles that once played out through the taking of heads<sup>35</sup> and marriage alliances, were now manifested in the competition to place family members in government positions and secure access to the largesse of the state money emanating from Dili. The officials responsible for administering the highlands were no longer the Portuguese, their *mestizo* allies or homesick *pegawai* (civil servants) from Java, but the highlanders themselves, albeit ones living in ways their ancestors had never imagined.

In a sense the clans that once resisted lowland power now

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<sup>35</sup> For more detail on the role of headhunting in pre-colonial *Meto suko* see McWilliam (1996), 'Severed Heads that Germinate the State'.

exercise it, albeit in a form critically heated and changed by their sometimes uneasy proximity to the other elements constitutive of lowland life. To an outsider, the uniforms, centrally controlled budgets, morning exercises and official stamps that define the everyday work of governance in Oecussi reveal a typically Timor-Leste combination of Indonesian-style and Dili-centric nationalism. What the present study sets out to show is how the networks and ontological understandings that underpin the ways this system operates are very often lodged in the meto world of the hills. In the next section of this chapter, I set each to describe each of these approaches in more detail.

### Encounter. Change. Experience

The theory used throughout this book can be divided into three broad categories: theories of encounter, theories of change, and theories of experience. Here I briefly provide an explanation of this layered model before setting out to explain each part in more detail.

At its broadest this book is a study of encounter – research with its intellectual roots in the literature on highland Southeast Asia pioneered by Edmund Leach (1965) in Burma and most notably advanced in Scott’s (2009) *The Art of Not Being Governed*. Looking at the history of Southeast Asia, Scott employs the term Zomia to describe a vast upland area, including parts of the Indochinese peninsula, Tibet, and Southwest China, which (historically at least) were inhabited by a population distinguished from that of the irrigated valleys by their persistent embrace of swidden agriculture, distinct languages, and animist and/or ancestor-based religion. Low-

land kingdoms and European colonial regimes both tended to consider the inhabitants of this region as 'primitive', a view accepted by early anthropologists who took it as received wisdom that these 'hill tribes' were indigenes driven from warmer and more fertile land by their inability to compete with more 'advanced' newcomers. Scott disputes this, making the case that the people of Zomia were mostly isolated by choice, choosing to settle in places and live in ways that put them beyond the reach of states that would, given the chance, tax their harvests, conscript their boys, and erode their autonomy. The Meto, though of Maritime Southeast Asia rather than the massif, fit this framework. Effectively governing themselves until recent decades, within their loose confederacy of politico-ritual domains, life revolved around subsistence farming, ritual exchange, and the veneration of ancestral and elemental spirits. Relations with the lowland state were defined by trade, hostility, and even deference, but almost never direct control.

It goes without saying that things are different now: roads, telephones, money, schools, sacks of subsidized rice from Vietnam. Even in remote areas the outside world is unavoidable, and that has affected almost everything. Critics of Scott, perhaps most prominently Hjørleifur Jonsson (2014) in *Slow Anthropology*, have taken this reality as cause to attack his Zomia hypothesis, reducing it to the proposition that 'the game must be over for the highlanders because their authentic way of life is incompatible with modern national realities' (26). This is not a perspective I share. Rather, I make the case that while it is true that travel, both physical and digitally mediated, has gone some way towards collapsing the difference between highland and lowland domains, the old ontologies continue to exist alongside the new, emergent



forms. Scott's framework then is still relevant to the study of originally highland societies, but given that highlanders no longer live only in the mountains it is one that needs to be supplemented with theories that allow us to grapple with personal and societal change.

Beyond my focus on the socio-geographical fact of Oecussi's highland/lowland divide, and the evident transformation spurred by its changing nature, the challenge remains of how to describe contemporary life in Oecussi in a way that is compelling as well as cogent. Ethnographers who have previously worked among the Meto<sup>36</sup> have produced masterful accounts of their political organization and historiography, but they have generally done so from broad structuralist perspectives, rarely focusing on how (to paraphrase Geertz) individuals 'give form to experience and point to action' (1970, 95–96). In addition, then, to approaches calibrated to upland/lowland encounter and processes of societal/personal change, the third layer of theory ordering this book sets out to engage with the sort of phenomenological and empirical perspectives that one of Geertz's colleagues<sup>37</sup>, Bruner (1986), called the 'anthropology of experience'. A concern with the detailed description of life stories and individual states of being, will, I hope, be a way of tempering the sometimes essentializing effect of more global modes of description.

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<sup>36</sup> Notably Middelkoop (1963), Schulte Nordholt (1971), Fox (1999) and McWilliam (2002).

<sup>37</sup> Shortly before Geertz's death in 2006, Bruner contributed a chapter to the volume, *Clifford Geertz by his Colleagues* (Shweder & Good 2005).

## Theories of encounter

At the heart of my analysis is the idea that Oecussi was (and to an extent still is) what Scott (2009, 6–7), building on the work of Gellner (1969), Clastres (1977) and van Schendel (2002), calls a ‘state-repelling space’: a ‘fiscally sterile’ place where the authority of the lowland government was rarely or never enforced because the wealth exploitable from the population was not worth the labour required by a pre-modern state to extract it. Tsing (2005), Li (1999) and Graeber (2007) have all written about highland populations from a similar perspective. Discarding the received idea that upland populations were those who had fled due to their inability to compete with more technologically advanced invaders, they have argued that their dispersal to ecologically marginal areas and adaption of mobile technologies of sustenance such as swidden farming was a deliberate strategy to avoid confrontation with exploitative colonial states.

Scott (2009) himself concedes that his Zomia hypothesis describes a mode of social organization that in many ways has had its time. Enabled by ‘distance demolishing-technologies’ (45) and spurred by the promise that underground wealth might lend value to marginally cultivatable land, since the end of the Second World War the previously little-governed uplands of Southeast Asia have increasingly become ‘enclosed’ by the projection of state authority (10). Extending this body of work to an analysis of current-day Oecussi, the question I pose is simply: what’s next? Until decades ago, the Meto were an almost exclusively highland people who avoided, and sometimes actively resisted, any intrusion from the river valley below. Now the district’s main town is inhabited mostly

by relocated highlanders, and the most politically powerful among them are not the *naijuuf* (princes) or *meob* (warriors), but *funcionarius* and *xefe departamentu* (departmental heads). Taking Scott as my point of departure, I ask what happens when people whose socio-political system evolved, in part, to avoid lowland authority, physically relocate to the lowlands, and begin to appropriate and project the type of power they once resisted?

### Theories of change

The one person in Oecussi who would talk to me about the old practice of head hunting assured me of two things: one, they didn't do it anymore;<sup>38</sup> two, when they did, it was a peace-building exercise. My informant had made his career dealing with the many (more or less) well-meaning foreigners who had come to reconstruct his country after 1999, often by 'building peace' in one way or another, and he had a sense of what it was that someone who looked like me probably wanted to hear. When the heads were taken, he said, the war was unquestionably over, and the process of building peace could begin.

Readers may be reassured that my point in recounting this

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<sup>38</sup> Although headhunting between *suko* in Oecussi appears to have ended sometime in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, during the war of 1999 both sides routinely beheaded those they killed for fear that the soul of an un-beheaded corpse would return to haunt them, a belief that is likely an echo of this old practice. There were also many rumours about a certain highland village whose residents were said to occasionally kidnap and ritually behead someone from Indonesian Timor. Whatever the truth of the matter, they seemed very friendly when I visited.

anecdote is not to propose that the UN start taking heads as part of its peacekeeping practice, but to illustrate how the redeployment of ostensibly universal ideas in unfamiliar contexts can remake those ideas in radical and potentially unsettling ways. Perhaps the foremost theorist of this pervasive yet fragmented new paradigm of global connection is Anna Tsing. She writes that while life on earth is more connected than ever, these connections are delivered in pieces – ideas and practices that as they travel the planet may be hybridized, distorted, misunderstood, and remade through contact with ways of being and physical realities that those who created them could never have imagined. In describing this, she draws on the metaphor of ‘friction’ and argues that ‘understanding global connection in such a way’ can be a method of ‘interrupting dominant stories of globalization to offer more realistic alternatives’ (2005, 271). The thought of Collier and Ong (2005, 9–11), particularly their notion of ‘global assemblage’, which envisages 21<sup>st</sup>-century lifeworlds as sites of encounter in which socio-political frameworks unpredictably and creatively interact, has similarly been of use in contemplating this atomized reality.

What interests me about such perspectives is how they allow us to see Oecussi not as a marginal corner of an all-too-often dysfunctional state, but as a polity with its own valid logic and function. Having served in the enclave as a United Nations (UN) adviser to the Timorese government tasked with promoting what they regarded as ‘good governance’, I can confirm that practices that, by any internationally agreed definition of the term, might be regarded as ‘corrupt’ are

present.<sup>39</sup> Having worked there as an anthropologist with no real agenda other than getting to know people and trying to understand something of their lives, I can also report that the apparently corrupt officials saw this behaviour as simply providing the appropriate assistance to members of the family and clan. While the recently relocated highlanders of Oecussi have borrowed from their former rulers and current international patrons whatever words, ideas, and practices they have found useful, as I discovered during my time with the UN, they have made use of these strictly on their own terms, often in ways that would leave those responsible for importing them scandalized.<sup>40</sup> peace (T: *dame*), law (T: *lei*), marriage (T: *kaben*), corruption (T: *korupsaun*), family (T: *familia*), justice (T: *justifcia*). These concepts are not deployed in a vacuum but in a crowded space where they rub up against all sorts of other ideas, understandings, and interests, the process that Tsing calls friction and which ultimately determines the form they take. In Oecussi, peace and the hunting of human heads from the enemy clan across the valley can be discussed in the same sentence. In my country, Australia, it cannot. In Australia, lending government cars to relatives would land you on the front page of the tabloids and potentially in prison. In Timor, for a high-ranking public servant who is also an *atoni* 'na'ek (great man) in his clan, not doing so would be unthinkable. Given that so much in Oecussi is determined by this often

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<sup>39</sup> See Chapter 3 for more detail.

<sup>40</sup> There is evidence that, in a less intense way, this had been going on for a long time. When he visited in 1699 English privateer and explorer William Dampier (cited in Hägerdal, 2012, 192) commented of the Timorese he met that 'they seem in words to acknowledge the King of Portugal for their sovereign; yet they will not accept any officers sent by him.'

uneasy interaction of *meto* and *kase*, the lens of Tsing's friction seems an excellent way of inquiring into the meaning of the state and societal practices that govern everyday life.

### Theories of experience

As suggested above, one of the difficulties in making the experiences emergent in travel between the *kase* and *meto* the subject of academic inquiry is that, in venturing beyond clear categories and into the opaque realm of what lies between, words sometimes fail us. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, William James noted in his *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Malachowski 2014, 14–15) the challenge this would pose to the social sciences. The human condition, he says, 'is superabundant', and even though the meaning we seek may be vested in personal experience ('the temperament of life in its philosophy' as he calls it in the florid language of his time), making such experience manifest in writing challenges not just the conventions of academic style but language itself. Meaning, he implies, emerges not so much from narrative but from narratives manifold, indistinct, and chaotic. Working at around the same time as James, pioneering sociologist Wilhelm Dilthey (Dilthey & Rickman 1976, 161) wrote on similar themes, arguing for the value of making individual experience the object of study in a way that was later taken up by anthropologists Bruner, Turner, and Geertz. These giants of postwar anthropology had become disillusioned with the limitations of structuralist thinking that was, in their view, causing anthropology to 'wither on the vine' (Bruner and Turner 1986, 3). They argued for the utility of an 'anthropology of experience' that eschews the description of

social systems in favour of a focus on ‘how individuals actually experience their culture’ (4). Later in the same volume, Bruner makes a point about how an anthropologist, practically, might present their data to achieve this end. ‘Ethnographies’, he writes, ‘are guided by an implicit narrative structure’ (138).

Seeking ways to apply this theory, I found inspiration in the storytelling customs of another highland people, the Hmong of Laos. In *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, Fadiman (1997, 12) describes how Hmong oral narratives often begin with the phrase *hais cuaj txub kaum txub* – ‘to speak of all manner of things’ – a way of ‘reminding the listeners that the world is full of things that may not seem to be connected but actually are; that no event occurs in isolation’ (12–13).<sup>41</sup> Such a perspective comes close to what Geertz (1973) described as thick description, and can also be taken as an argument for the utility of borrowing from narrative prose to describe life over time and in detail. Michael Jackson’s thoughts on this issue are worth quoting in detail:

*When I did fieldwork on home and belonging in Central Australia, I often had the experience of being in a picaresque novel. Life seemed a succession of events or happenings, each subtly disjointed from before and after, emergent and framed. Moreover, these events were like Chekhovian slices of life. Something was brought to light in them, something was subtly changed or differently understood. When I came to write, it seemed only natural to make these episodes, many of which had been journeys, into book chapters – so imparting to the written work something*

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<sup>41</sup> Another inspiration along similar lines comes from auteur Terrence Malik’s 2011 film *The Tree of Life*, a tale of 1950s Texas that includes a ‘flashback’ to what appears to be the origins of life on Earth and a fight between dinosaurs.

*of the shape of lived events. When I began writing up this research, it seemed obvious that I should use these dramatic events to throw into relief the tensions and intentions within this social field.* (2005, p xxvi).

In the next section of this introduction, I briefly describe how I came to be doing fieldwork in Oecussi and begin to think about the creatively charged nature of the liminal in Meto life. In doing this I am inspired also by Wacquant (2004), Bourgois and Schonberg (2009), Holmes (2013), and Stuesse (2016), specifically because their often visceral firsthand accounts of participant observation are ones that acknowledge the value of integrating bodily, emotional, and intellectual encounters in the field, into the fabric of an ethnographic study. Including myself as a character in the stories I present will, I hope, leave readers with no illusions concerning the fundamentally limited nature of the knowledge that I (and other anthropologists) are able to attain as outsiders and short-term guests.

### Encountering Oecussi: serendipity and the social imperative

Despite my early introduction to Timor-Leste discussed above, and even having briefly passed through it as a backpacker travelling overland/sea from Melbourne to China shortly after its renewed independence in 2002 ('these people', I wrote in my journal as I looked out the window of the minibus, 'look hungry'). By 2011, both my nomadism and dreams of returning to Timor to work and maybe even do some good had fizzled out. The dead-end job I was working in Sydney didn't offer much in the way of prospects for adventure, but was sufficiently



undemanding that I could use company time to complete a master's degree and apply (while the boss was looking the other way) for jobs that did.

'Australian Youth Ambassadors for Development' (AYAD) was a federal government programme intended to fund the placement of Australian youth<sup>42</sup> with government departments and non-government organizations (NGOs) in developing countries, mostly as 'advisers'. Luckily for me, a senior manager with the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Timor-Leste at the time was always on the lookout for ways to save money, and realized that the AYAD programme offered an opportunity for him to acquire staff members whose salaries came out of Canberra's budget rather than his. Within the space of a few weeks I went from vegetating in a Sydney office cubicle to looking out at the mist-shrouded mountains of central Timor from the open window of a UN Mi-8<sup>43</sup> flying into Oecussi.

I describe my time with the UN in 2011 and 2012 and how it set the scene for the fieldwork that is the basis of this book in detail in Chapters two and three, but suffice to note here that it involved serving as an 'adviser' in a Timorese government office concerned with programmes intended to create employment and improve labour conditions in the district. This position was distinct from that of the other UN employees based there. While their work mostly took place from a guarded compound with 24-hour electricity and

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<sup>42</sup> Defined as I was not yet 31 at the date of departure. I turned 31 two months after arriving.

<sup>43</sup> A large Soviet-designed helicopter intended for carrying soldiers and cargo. Between 2006 and 2012 they provided most of the UN's air transport in Timor.

used the English language, I worked ‘outside the wire’ as they called it, immersed, during the day at least, in the reality of a Timorese public servant. I quickly came to acquire a network of local friends and acquaintances and an appreciation of how the (frequently dysfunctional seeming) business of government there was both enabled and stymied by an older, indigenous way of doing things that I would later come to know as the *meto*.

Living in a world so different from the one I had come from (and yet so close physically: Australia was near enough that in the dry season the north wind delivered to us the baking heat of its deserts, and the arid hills with their stunted gum trees and red soil resembled the Kimberly Ranges) was exciting because with every small element of life in Oecussi that I did start to understand, came an awareness of how much more there was to explore. Sometimes I would say to my fellow UN staff, ‘This place would be an anthropologist’s dream’.

The story of how I actually did end up returning to Oecussi as an anthropologist is long and features much good fortune, not the least of which was that due to my experience with the ILO in the district, I was able to make the case to a funding panel at The Australian National University that it was a place with which I was deeply familiar and where I was ready to work. At the time I might have even believed this optimistic appraisal of the situation, although when I finally did step off the ferry to begin my fieldwork at dawn one Friday morning in July 2014, it didn’t take me long to discover that I had been hopelessly over-optimistic. Things had changed in the three years since I was last in the enclave, and I was not even close to being as prepared as I had hoped.

The nature of this change was quite simple: at the end of

2012, the UN left. Whereas during my first time in Oecussi, I had been one outsider among many, now I was more or less an alien alone. In some ways this might have actually been an advantage – present-day anthropology builds upon the work of scholars whose methods were critically shaped by their (sometimes accidental) physical and social isolation<sup>44</sup>, but as the coddled product of a decidedly more connected time, it was new to me. My initial stay had been characterized by tentatively Tetun-speaking days, with off-hours spent among

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<sup>44</sup> Perhaps the most famous example of this is Bronislaw Malinowski, one of the towering figures of 20<sup>th</sup>-century anthropology, whose seminal fieldwork partially stemmed from his being stranded in the Trobriand Islands for four years due to the First World War. Although there was little sign of it in his books such as *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) and *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* (1935) that he wrote amid comfort and acclaim in London, with the posthumous release of his diaries (1967) it became clear that far from being admiring of or even always engaged with Trobriand culture, throughout his stay on the islands he often struggled with intense (and bad-tempered) loneliness and ennui that on some days left him struggling to emerge from beneath his mosquito net. Although known for writing as a confident man of science, his tetchy reaction when challenged on ethnographic detail (see Pulman 2004 for a discussion of his attempt to discredit a colonial official who refuted his assertion that Trobriand Islanders were unaware of the link between coitus and paternity) hints he may have been more aware of his limitations than he was willing to publicly acknowledge.

an often eccentric<sup>45</sup> multinational community, consisting of UN police (UNPOL, there to ‘mentor’ the local police force rather than enforce the law) and a handful of electoral advisers and technical contractors. Having been seconded to the UN from their home countries, many seemed bemused and/or slightly bewildered about ending up in this remote corner of an island they had typically never heard of nor thought much about before. Mostly out of a lack of other options, they provided each other with a sense of belonging and social

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<sup>45</sup> I use this term deliberately. Throughout 2011 and 2012 I found the behavior of the UN police in Oecussi fascinating due to its situational and resolutely ‘off the record’ nature. In the boarding house (I: *kost*) we shared, Malik the Egyptian (not his real name or nationality) had me watch a clip from his favourite film, *The Devil’s Advocate*, in which Satan (Al Pacino) rather graphically urges his son (Keanu Reeves) to help him beget the antichrist, before soliloquizing to me about what this scene revealed about the Middle East conflict. Declaring haughtily that taking a *mandi* (I: bucket shower) was beneath him, Darius (another pseudonym) from Romania would spend extended periods of time lathering himself in the filthy ablutions demountable at the UN base, taking the opportunity for a leisurely chat with anyone who happened to use the urinal as he did so. One much-repeated tale had a pair of international ‘peacekeepers’ get into a physical scuffle over use of a favoured vehicle from the car-pool that had to be broken up by their Timorese counterparts. The occasion when a Portuguese police officer (jokingly?) declared he would repatriate a troublesome colleague ‘in a body bag’ was cause for unfettered hilarity rather than an issue for HR. What is striking about such antics is that, wherever they were from, the UN police were educated, well-connected and ambitious – individuals who knew how to look smart in a uniform and toe the line. Once deployed, however, often bored, operating in a second or third language, and not fully accountable to the laws and networks that really mattered to them, eccentricities that would have been suppressed in their home countries emerged for all to see. Though beyond the scope of this book, the behavior of UN personnel posted individually far from home would make a good topic for further study.

support, united by shaky international English and general indifference to the affairs of the Timorese, whose chances of building a functioning, peaceful country were dismissed as poor, but generally evinced little interest in at all.

For all its problematic aspects this small (mostly male) international community was good about welcoming new members – a source of diversion, if nothing else. The moustachioed Pakistani military man who organized a daily game of badminton on the *alun-alun* (Indonesian-style grassy field/sports ground in the centre of town) warmly invited me to join. A pair of Romanian police would sometimes share the stash of homemade *palinka* (plum brandy) they brought with them and, after a few glasses, would attempt to teach all-comers to swear ‘like in Transylvania’. Perhaps because there was often little else to do, in the cafeteria/bar that was the hub of the small UN base there was always someone up for a game of pool – a happy state of affairs that persisted until the night a particularly heavy-set Portuguese police officer got liquored up and thought it fun to jump on the pool table, putting it permanently out of commission. While working with the UN in Oecussi, even glued to a sticky plastic chair in a Timorese government office during the day, my engagement with Timorese life was something that usually took place on my terms.

By contrast, in July 2014 I found myself one of perhaps three people in the entire district with the ability to converse in English, and my immediate feeling was one of being overwhelmed. My first morning back I walked to where the UN base had been in the centre of town, knowing that it had been decommissioned in late 2012, but somehow not able to believe it until I had been there. What had been a Kafkaesque

bubble where international busy work was carried out to the reassuring chug of the generator was now silent – used in part by the municipal government but mostly just abandoned, the gate ajar, vines overtaking the razor wire, broken glass, and yellowing papers underfoot in what had been offices. As I poked around the remains of the bar/cafeteria where I had spent so many nights, I was startled by a dishevelled figure materializing at the door.

‘*Malae,*’ (foreigner) he said. ‘You’re back.’

Although the man was vaguely familiar at best, it transpired that back when the UN was still in town he had been one of the security guards who worked the gate and had nightly signed me in when I arrived for my meal. Everyone else had left a year ago, he explained, but not him. He alone had been faithfully waiting for ‘us’ to return. And now we had. This made him very happy (T: *kontenti loos*), he said. He hoped he could have his job back.

In rusty Tetun, I tried to explain that for better or worse my presence didn’t herald the return of the UN mission and I was just there, independently, to do some research for my *skripsi S3* (I: PhD thesis). I would not be personally reopening the compound. The man smiled, nodded, seemed unconvinced and insisted I accompany him to what remained of the guardhouse where we could celebrate the long-awaited return of the UN with a cup of coffee. Inside was a dank mess of bedding and a kerosene stove on the floor. On the bench the security guards had once used to fill out their paperwork were a few dirty plastic cups and assorted sheets of paper. He rustled about looking for one in particular.

‘This is it,’ (T: *ida ne’e*) he said hopefully, plucking it out and handing it to me.

It seemed to be some sort of requisition form – faded UN letterhead up the top, a bewildering jumble of bureaucratic English below, evidently the object of considerable anxiety and sweaty penmanship. After squinting at it for a few minutes I managed to decipher enough to see that it was an attempt to make a business case for a computer, which by allowing him to more effectively keep track of who was coming and going at the main gate would enhance security. All he needed now was to find someone to lodge it with.

He looked at me imploringly. ‘Can you give it consideration Maun?’ (T: brother).

‘*Kolega*,’ (T: mate, friend) ‘I’m a just a student. I don’t work for the UN anymore. There’s nothing I can do to help you.’

‘Thank you, brother. I hope you can do something.’

Especially at the beginning of my fieldwork, one of the difficulties of trying to communicate in okay but far-from-perfect Tetun was that if I told people something they didn’t want or expect to hear, they tended to assume they had misunderstood.

I never went back. Later I heard he had accosted a Timorese friend of mine, demanding to know why ‘his foreigner’ had not delivered the computer yet. He was a crazy man (T: *bulak*) my friend told me; I should take care to avoid him.

A month later, I met him again. I was away from the town this time, piloting my little scooter up the narrow road that steeply ascends from the rice fields of the Tono Valley on my way to visit some friends in the mountains. I had just come around a sharp bend when I saw him, standing under a fig tree with a bundle of banana leaves (the favoured fodder for tethered cows) beside him and a cigarette smouldering in his mouth. Heeding my friend’s advice for a second I considered

whether I might be able to zoom past unseen, but on the rugged roads of rural Oecussi, which are not at all conducive to zooming, only really bitter enemies decline to stop and chat. I pattered into the shade alongside him and brought the bike to a halt.

He didn't seem all that surprised to see me. '*Malae*,' (T: foreigner), he said as though he saw me there every day, 'where are you going?'

I was worried he might still be angry and was glad he didn't seem to be. Like in most Austronesian languages, 'Where you are going?' (*ba ne'ebe?*) is as much a generic salutation as a serious inquiry about one's eventual destination.

'Just to visit some friends,' I replied.

He smiled broadly as if this amused him. 'Good, *malae*. Good.' He didn't seem to have anything else he wanted to say. We looked at each other awkwardly.

'*Hare dalan*,' (T: watch the road) he said eventually.

'You too, my friend,' I replied, relieved that this reunion was to be an exceptionally short one and that he hadn't asked about the computer. I flicked the bike's starter button. He tossed his cigarette and went to reshoulder the leaves.

'*Ate logu Maun*,' (T: See you later, brother) I called.

'*Hit tnao tok Uis Neno*,' ('Go with God') he replied, and that was the last I saw of him.

Although fleeting, coming early in my fieldwork as it did, my encounter with the former security guard was significant in the way it shaped my thinking about life in Oecussi and how I worked there as an anthropologist. On a broad level it solidified my sometimes wavering conviction that, difficult as it was, there was value in being alone in the field, in particular through the way the isolation could be an impetus to engage



with whatever serendipitous encounter might emerge (very often literally) around the next bend in the road.

More specifically, it prompted me to reflect on the possibility that the frameworks I had initially used to understand Oecussi, and had been socialized to believe were universal (borrowed, for the most part, from ‘development’ thinking, and strengthened by their association with often powerful sources of ‘first world’ authority and money), were in fact utterly foreign to this place, and that even when they were deployed, they almost never (at least from the perspective of the locals) retained their original form or meaning.

In 2011–2012, in my capacity as an international civil servant tasked with helping build a ‘modern’ state, it was hard not to see Oecussi as a place defined by what it lacked. The accepted term ‘least developed country’ had its own well-worn acronym, and by any internationally recognized metric there didn’t seem to be much doubt about its applicability – Oecussi’s mountain roads were appalling, electricity was often absent and, as the actions of the guard illustrated, its economy moribund. And yet, returning as an anthropologist, I began to notice that the graphs, acronyms and reports outsiders tended to rely upon to make sense of the situation had little to do with how the people whose lives they ostensibly quantified saw things. Rather, it seemed, that if I was to have any chance at all of ever beginning to get a sense of how the Meto interacted with and found meaning in the world, I would have to set aside the presumptions I had brought with me to humbly listen and watch. To accept, though it was difficult as both a scholar and a civil servant, that much of what I saw would be almost completely foreign to me, that I would never fully understand and that to do otherwise, would be doing both me and my hosts

a grave disservice.

From any point in Pante Makassar it was possible to see the often cloud-shrouded massif of central Timor looming over the town, and I wondered if in this geographical fact I might find a starting point for my task. Beyond their striking physicality, how might the presence of the mountains, and the preponderance of people whose origins were within them, influence the life of the town? Though on its dusty streets, the former UN guard presented himself to me as a desperate job seeker, serendipity, occasioned by nothing more sophisticated than persistent hanging round, had revealed to me another dimension to his story that he either chose not to disclose or considered so commonplace as to not be worth mentioning. His determination to reprise his cherished years as a UN gate operator were not so much an attempt to survive, as to attain a sort of modernity that, though passionately coveted, was predicated on the presence of a hinterland to which he could fall back on to find food, shelter, and family. What other sort of shadows, I wondered, did economic, social and spiritual realities lodged in the Meto-speaking mountains have on the life of the increasingly Tetun-dominated and accessible town? How did people go about the business of crossing the frontier between these two worlds that I would later come to associate with the terms *kase* (foreign) and *meto* (familiar)? What things did they carry with them? What did they leave behind?

A month into my fieldwork, as the former guard receded into the rear-view mirror, I knew that in spite of all the difficulties involved, it was only through an extended and immersive presence that I could hope to approach these questions in any meaningful or original way.

Strolling in a Southeast Asian borderland: local frameworks,

## international aspirations

During my first week back in the enclave, I tried to hold back a building sense of panic over what I'd got myself into by starting to assemble a routine calculated to keep me busy and become the basis for how I would spend the rest of my stay. Trajectories of learning were charted, budgets were calculated, emails were carefully drafted and expressed back to HQ. One morning, looking out at the limpid Savu sea, I created a spreadsheet to keep track of the days and dollars, which I then forget all about for five years. Instead, as it happened, my research defied managerialism – almost every week there was some new escapade to buckle the hypothetical scaffolding I had tried to fit together, and everywhere I went were stories and sacred houses, tales of ancestral footpaths, and extravagant promises of futuristic roads – people wanted me to listen – ‘Will you have another cup of coffee, Mr. Mike?’ The amount of data was only limited by my ability to scribble down fieldnotes and decipher them later and although, as I touch on below, not all of the places I went or episodes I observed get their own chapter in this volume, critically they all gave shape to this book and its conclusion, and so are worth quickly reflecting upon here.

Settling in a house owned by a fisherman in the coastal village of Oesono (once the seat of the district's Portuguese-endorsed king), my immediate goal was quite simple: to maximize the time I spent around people and their daily activities, and minimize the time reading novels in my hammock. Ethnographically I deliberately cast a broad net. My material was daily life, and my method was simply trying to be around enough that I might, eventually, become a relatively unobtrusive observer of it.

As it turned out, time was not hard to fill. Although the enclave was small, travel along its rugged roads and mountain paths was arduous, and the work and sociality of those I interacted with tended to stretch out over days rather than hours. Mondays and Tuesdays I would often spend in the border village of Passabe where smuggling goods, cattle, and people across the international border was a way of life for many.<sup>46</sup> On Wednesdays or Thursdays I would usually try to walk up the jungle trail from the rapidly modernizing village of Mahata on the coast, to Kutete in the mountains where shifting agriculture was still the basis of day-to-day life and harvest rites (*'fua*) presided over by Meto ritual practitioners (*tobe*) were important.

Kutete was home to a variety of helpful characters, in particular a former journalist Jon Koa; his mother, Maria known for her expansive garden of medicinal herbs; and Laban, a good-natured young schoolteacher from the lowlands who rued his luck at having been posted to this place of long, empty afternoons and chilly evenings and was very happy for my company. While the presence of people like this made it a good place for research it was always with a slight sense of relief that I made my way back to town for a good meal. Weekends in Pante Makassar were given over to activities like hanging out at the market, visiting friends, or attending weddings; leisurely activities that were only interrupted by the need to shift my notes from the school exercise books in which I was constantly scrawling them to the relative safety of my computer.

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<sup>46</sup> In the end there was simply no room in this book for most of the material I gathered in Passabe. It will form the basis of a follow-up volume.

Despite or perhaps because of its ever-shifting nature, to my surprise the method worked well and I slowly became a familiar face in the places I frequented, sometimes to the point where those I was closest to started to worry if I didn't appear. Once, late to depart for Passabe, I got an irate phone call from my main informant there and cockfight supremo, Matteus.

'Mr. Mike,' he said in agitated-sounding Tetun, 'where are you?' He then informed me sternly, in English, that 'time is money'. I was startled to hear this, both because Matteus didn't speak English and Passabe was a place where the tending of gardens and goats was rarely very profitable or particularly hurried. When I spoke to him later, he told me that he had learned the phrase from his son, and understood it to be a way of scolding someone for being late. I took his point. Though the original idea had been to recruit 'informants', the relationship I established with Matteus ended up becoming more real than anything suggested by that clinical term, replete with the need for reciprocal care and courtesy. In an early version of this manuscript a reviewer gave me pause by asking about my use of the word 'friends' to refer to the people who inhabit this ethnography – but in truth they were both. Cultural, linguistic and somatic immersion was at once a research method and a way of fulfilling my simple need not to be alone in a place far from home.

Although adapting to speaking mostly in Tetun and Meto rather than English was a challenge, in many ways Oecussi in 2014 to 2016 was a particularly congenial site for a lone anthropologist. It was, very often, a friendly place for a foreigner, where many people both enjoyed the novelty of having an interested stranger to tell their stories to, and

had time to do it.<sup>47</sup> This tendency was admittedly more pronounced in and around Pante Makassar, which had hosted a small number of *kaes muti*' (white foreigners) like me for centuries<sup>48</sup> than in the mountains where people (though still generally accepting of my presence) could be wary of my strange looks and presumed high status. Even in the centre of town the roads were usually empty, and many people passed their days working in the gardens around their house. There was always someone happy to chat if they saw me strolling by.

'Bon dia,' they would say as I came ambling along (I was hard to miss), perhaps pausing as they chopped up a banana tree stem for the pigs or looking up from the sweaty task of pulling weeds from the corn garden in their front yard.

'Bon dia,' I would reply.<sup>49</sup>

If the friendly stranger was a man and not doing anything

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<sup>47</sup> I began to understand this better on visiting a friend who was doing his fieldwork in Mashad, Iran, where people tend to be far more wary of foreigners, and weather, politics and social norms made engaging with the community a more difficult prospect.

<sup>48</sup> Indeed there were several families in the town that proudly counted such *kaes muti*' among their ancestors. These foreign relatives were mostly Portuguese soldiers and administrators but there were also people around with tales of African and Indian ancestors.

<sup>49</sup> This form of interaction, referred to in Tetun as *hasee malu* (greet each other) is a social norm throughout rural Timor. Especially in communities where everyone knows everyone, it is important to establish the identity and intentions of any stranger who is wandering round.

pressing,<sup>50</sup> they would often ask me to come into their yard, where plastic chairs would be placed in the shade, a plastic table fetched and draped with a tablecloth, and his wife or children asked to fetch coffee and biscuits.

While Southeast Asia is often of interest to researchers today for its rapidly growing economy and the increasingly complex nature of its connections to global networks of belief and commerce, for most of my stay in Oecussi, and despite sometimes fevered talk of the new special economic zone (see Chapter 4), it remained (on the surface of things at least) truly sleepy in a way that reminded me of the stories older people had told me about growing up in outer Indonesia in the 1960s. In Oecussi the echoes of global empires and indigenous kingdoms were ever present, but the instant global connection and depersonalized urban life that characterizes the 21<sup>st</sup> century throughout much of the region had yet to fully

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<sup>50</sup> It is worth noting here that this form of social interaction was highly gendered. While women would greet me warmly and indeed sometimes offer me a glass of water if I looked particularly thirsty, for her to invite an unknown man (even a wandering foreigner such as me) to socialise could easily trigger a storm of gossip, and was thus something they generally avoided. On the few occasions women did ask me in, I was politely asked to wait outside while children were dispatched to find the man of the household to deal with the foreigner. As a result of this convention the people I spent the most time with tended to be male, something that certainly shaped my perspective on Meto life. The main exception to this rule was a number of older matriarchs whose age and social status meant that the pressure for them to act in a socially 'modest' manner had been somewhat relaxed. One particularly close informant/friend, the formidable Avo Marta, was even known to enjoy smoking the occasional cigarette while she was talking to me, a vice which in Oecussi was otherwise almost exclusively the preserve of men. Marta was able to get away with it in part simply because no one was willing to risk her wrath by even hinting she do otherwise.

arrive. On Monday and Thursday morning an overnight ferry would arrive from Dili, usually, and for the majority without a passport this was the only legal means of overland travel to Timor-Leste's other twelve districts. The international border that surrounded the enclave is a hard one, and although the police and soldiers garrisoned on it would happily look the other way for those who were visiting relatives, or on a rare shopping trip to Kefamenanu, an undocumented overland journey to Dili and back was a far more uncertain prospect. The small airfield<sup>51</sup> served only a solitary single-engine plane operated by the Missionary Air Fellowship, which visited irregularly for medical evacuations. While government officials would requisition *kareta estadu* (state cars) as runabouts for themselves and their families, in mid-2014 private cars were almost unknown, and around midday on any hot afternoon in the shade of the trees that lined the town's main street

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<sup>51</sup> The redevelopment of Oecussi's rough airfield into an 'international airport' replete with long runway capable of landing large jets was a centre-piece of the plans for a special economic zone. For most of my fieldwork this was just talk, and the airfield remained a rocky strip used by a missionary-operated air ambulance and as grazing land for local herders – a precarious situation for goats and air-travelers alike. At the end of 2018 locals living near the project site told me that state-owned Indonesian construction giant PT Wijaya Karya (usually known as WIKA), in partnership with the Portuguese Instituto de Soldadura e Qualidade (ISQ), had almost finished transforming this into a large and modern-looking transport facility that is due to be officially opened in 2019. At the present time, the airport is only used by the air-ambulance and a state-owned Twin Otter passenger aircraft operated by a Canadian company. It is hoped that in future some of the regional airlines that operate in eastern Indonesia might add Oecussi to their schedule, thus directly linking it to destinations such as Kupang, Flores and Bali. Despite this, unless they are ill enough to qualify for medical evacuation, air travel remains out of reach for much of the population and is likely to remain so.



that ran from the *alun-alun* to the sea, you could find dogs, pigs, cows, and goats dozing complacently in the shade. While public servants living in the town would typically own a motor scooter, as did some better-off families in the hills, this was still a place where journeys long or short were very often made on foot.

This book, then, is one that explores not just the specific story of a place where life is shaped by a tangle of tangible boundaries, but its status, common in this quickly changing world, betwixt what will almost certainly be distinct epochs in terms of economic activity and social organization. The sociable nature of strolling was essential to my fieldwork in Oecussi, and yet it was characteristic of a place which reliable electrification, motorized transport, and large-scale integration into the global economy had yet to reach. More than any other subject, when I spoke to people it was to the bright and busy future that was thought to be around the corner that our conversation would often drift. Although this book is one that sets out in detail how Meto socio-spiritual frameworks remain a key resource for understanding and acting on the world in Oecussi, as they are deployed in pursuit of an internationally connected *kase* future, they are being profoundly and continually remade.

INDIGENOUS SPIRITS AND GLOBAL ASPIRATIONS IN A SOUTHEAST ASIAN  
BORDERLAND



*Photo by Rui Pinto*

## Chapter 2: Body and belief in Timor-Leste

In *Alive in the Writing*, Kirin Narayan (2012) sets out to explain how ethnographers could stand to benefit from employing the stylistic tools of creative prose. The techniques of those who write novels and narrative non-fiction, she argues, offer ethnographers a way to give a sense of moments and things that may in their fullness elude capture in field notes or photographs – ‘A scene depicting a person’s vulnerability stranded within a messily unfurling story’ she writes ‘can communicate more about that person than a summary that tidily wraps up how things turned out’ (65).

Geertz (1973) would likely have called this thick description, helpfully pointing out that through such methods one might distinguish even between a wink and a twitch. Towards the end of his life, he was happy to go on record and announce that, ‘I don’t do systems’<sup>52</sup> (Micheelsen, 2002). From the

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<sup>52</sup> A comment that was particularly striking to me given that the most detailed work by an anthropologist on West Timor is Schulte Nordholt’s *The Political System of the Atoni of Timor*.

1970s he was noted for his distinctive way of writing – an anthropologist ‘who recoils at typologies, grand theories, and universal generalisations’ (Shweder and Good, 2005, 1). Rather, he argued for the selection and presentation of vivid fragments over the abstract description of societies in their totality (Pollock, 2015, 5). Reflecting on his four decades of practising the approach, he described anthropologists as working with ‘swirls, confluxions, and inconstant connections’, and their final product as ‘pieced-together patternings after the fact’ (Geertz, 1995, 2).

To Geertz this was more than a throwaway observation. Like his colleagues Edward Bruner and Victor Turner, he had come to believe that the strictures of stylistic orthodoxy risked causing anthropology to ‘wither on the vine’ (1988, 5), and that a spirit of stylistic innovation would be part of its salvation. In 1988 he commented that anthropology didn’t yet know where ‘imaginative writing about real people in real places’ might fit, but that it would have to find out if it was to ‘continue as an intellectual force in contemporary culture’ (1988, 141). James Clifford was even more direct in arguing for the utility of the ties that bind, creating stories and ‘writing culture’. In the introduction to the famous book of the same name, he bluntly refers to ethnography as a form that should embrace ‘the partiality of cultural and historical truths’ that are its subject (Clifford & Marcus 1986, 6), a representation (to paraphrase Narayan’s analysis of his thought) rather than an objectively true reflection of human life.

The possibility that anthropology, if not imaginative, might cease to be relevant and compelling is one that should garner attention from those who practise the discipline in the put-upon postcolonial majority of this planet, which is sometimes

called the 'global south'. As Scheper-Hughes (1995, 420) argues, anthropology is a discipline that has the potential to be more than a 'site of knowledge' but also a 'site of action' – one that is uniquely placed to represent the disadvantaged in ways that are provocative and unsettling and can furnish those who would act with useful data, if not inspiration.

The truth and gravity of this, for me, became especially clear while working with the UN and government of Timor-Leste on a programme intended to improve the employment prospects of Timor-Leste's 'lost generation'<sup>53</sup> when I first went to Oecussi in 2011. The people we were trying to help were in their early twenties, and had finished school with just enough exposure to the outside world to dream of material attainments that went beyond the village, but almost none of the skills needed to realize them. They were generally glad to be rid of the Indonesian state, but separation from the Indonesian economy left them cut them off from what little chance of economic mobility they might once have had. They were poorly educated, poorly fed, disenfranchised from meaningful political or economic engagement with the outside world, and the systemic problems that had left them in this mess were not being addressed.

The reports I wrote from Oecussi were able to acknowledge this situation, but only by roping reality into an acceptable bureaucratic form. The experiences of those I encountered there were sometimes desperate and always contingent upon *meto* truths that were hard to express solely in English, and near impossible using dot points and action plans. My superiors in

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<sup>53</sup> For more on this term in the context of Timorese development see Paul (2010, 111).

Dili were high paid foreigners who liked to justify receiving a vastly highly salary than their Timorese colleagues<sup>54</sup> by frequently reminding people they were ‘flat out’, which was also why many of them also had no time to trouble themselves with the daily lives of those they were ostensibly trying to help (let alone learn Tetun, which, they would explain, wasn’t worth the effort because it wasn’t spoken by many people and thus was not useful to their career). Cow blood trickling over flyblown dust beneath the meat table at the Saturday market; the miasma of baby vomit, instant noodles, and warm, salty air that was the inside of the night ferry to Dili; the way, in mountain villages at dusk, you could hear the grass-wall muffled murmur of families gathering about the round house hearth. Reality, I found, was sensual and fragmented – and local lives and words resisted being condensed into an executive summary, the stock in trade of foreign consultants and advisers such as myself.<sup>55</sup> In my reports the animating interior of the *meto* was glossed with the term ‘traditional beliefs’. Approved vocab ran more to biz speak: ‘optics’, ‘metrics’, ‘deliverables’. It was plain that there was no room in this corner of the aid complex to understand that Timor

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<sup>54</sup> For a broader discussion for the persistent gap in pay and conditions between international and local staff in post-conflict nations see Severine (2014).

<sup>55</sup> It is worth noting here that although relatively unknown beyond Timor, since the mid-1970s Timorese poets using Tetun, Portuguese and Indonesian have worked to represent their experience to the world in their own words. See Biarujia (2004) and Soares (2006).

was no *terra nullius* of the mind<sup>56</sup> and that its people had ways of being in the world that were entirely distinct from, and sometimes contradictory to, those assumed as normative by the Dili government and its international backers.

What mattered, in the end, was that all the reports were submitted on time and in accordance with ‘best practice’. The more ambitious foreigners knew that if one played the game they would eventually be relieved of having to live in places like Dili and promoted to head office in Europe or North America, where Timor’s problems would be out of sight and in mind only during the working day. Anthropology would not fix this, but in seeking a way of engaging with the reality of a place (maybe even confronting people with it) and all its invisible injustices, delights, and surprises, one could, perhaps, chip away at the edges.

That year, after a hard day of writing meaningless reports, studying Tetun, and re-reading the office collection of yellowing *Jornal Independente*, I would retire to my hammock by the sea with a bottle of Portuguese wine and my iPod. While the wine worked well enough as a solace, the iPod was of limited use due to a computer glitch deleting most of my audio, with the exception of one CD, a recording of Allen Ginsberg’s ‘beat poetry’ read by the reedy-voiced poet himself (he described his

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<sup>56</sup> My inspiration for using this phrase comes from Standfield’s 2004 article critiquing the Australian media’s treatment of indigenous people and issues, “‘A Remarkably Tolerant Nation’?” Standfield herself was paraphrasing the words of Australian senator Aden Ridgeway. Kent (2012, 69) described the situation in similar terms, arguing that the UN’s initial project in Timor-Leste at times seemed to assume that the island was a *tabula rasa*, and had paid little regard to its specific historical social and economic conditions.

work as ‘lofty incantations which in the yellow morning were gibberish’<sup>57</sup>) sometime during early 1960s. It grew on me, and although I didn’t bring the iPod into the hills (it seemed better to listen to what was around me, even if it was often just the wind in the trees – unlike some of its neighbours to the west Timor is rarely noisy or crowded), Ginsberg came too, and his words had a way of fitting themselves to the landscape.

When it comes to methodology, one instance of this continues to resonate and, in a roundabout way, has inspired the experimental nature of this chapter. Arriving in a border hamlet after a long walk through the rain, chilled with mountain cold, and what I suspected might have been prodromal malaria, I went straight to my friend’s house in search of shelter and a hot coffee. He owned a *kios*, which had just shut for the day, a small concrete room where I changed out of my sodden clothes. The hamlet was called Abani<sup>58</sup>. Some fifteen years before, during the war of 1999, the Indonesian army had recruited many of its men to massacre their neighbours down the road in Tumin.

Even by the standards of ongoing violence at the time, this stood out as a particularly brutal episode, possibly exacerbated by the proximity of the Indonesian border and the presence of a dormant though decades-long inter-village feud. A survivor from Abani who, along with his father escaped into the hills to avoid taking part, told me how when they got to Tumin his neighbours had rounded up all the men and boys they could and hacked them to death. Postwar research found there were 82 victims in total (Robinson, 2003, 185) and that some of

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<sup>57</sup> See Trigilio (2000, 141–142).

<sup>58</sup> Part of Passabe subdistrict.



them were tortured before they were killed (Leong, 2004). Fifteen years later, life had largely moved on. Many of the killers had come back and were now middle-aged farmers – to look at, unremarkable in any way. The wives of those who died had remarried. People I spoke to in both Tumin and Abani told me that they recognized there was no choice but to try to let the bitterness recede. And yet, sure enough, the guilt and confusion were still there, some inchoate and exhausted sadness that wasn't present in other places and which, at first, I had no way to describe.

That afternoon though, in my friend's shop amid the sacks of rice, bottles of Napoleon 'whiskey',<sup>59</sup> piles of Super Mie (instant noodles), and musty rainwater dripping onto the floor, I found a way. The family had set up nativity scene: Mary, Joseph, and a little Timor-Leste flag propped up next to baby Jesus in a crib fashioned from bits of twisted fencing wire. And oddly (there's no other word for it) it brought to mind a few lines of Ginsberg (2006 [1956]) that for some reason had stuck in my mind and provided, in that moment, a way of thinking about what this sadness might have been:

*America, when will we end the human war?*

*Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.*

*I don't feel good, don't bother me.*

Although the time and place were radically different, for me the relevance of Ginsberg's lament was clear enough. The note it struck, one of near-demented, sick-making weariness brought on by insistent patriotism and backed by potentially world-ending military might, seemed immediately familiar in this isolated Timorese village. Its people had suffered so

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<sup>59</sup> An entirely distinct product from Napoleon Brandy.

much for those who ruled them, and in return had received so little. They had been patriotic Indonesians, and for this they were rewarded with official encouragement to massacre their neighbours. Afterwards the Indonesians departed forever, leaving the guilt and nightmares for their former subjects to deal with. And now they were patriotic again, the flag of another nation adorning their nativity scene, pledging allegiance to another clique of leaders in another distant capital who were unquestionably becoming wealthy<sup>60</sup> while they remained among Asia's poorest.

Narayan (2012) suggests that within anthropology, creative writing can be a way of getting at things that go beyond the empirically observable, and through the strange and sudden synchronicity I sensed between Ginsberg's words and the nativity scene in Abani that rainy afternoon, I came to believe it. Beyond this though, I felt I had stumbled upon a clue as to how I might describe the lives of others in a way that complicated my own privilege, using emic narrative to seek after the subjective truth of a moment rather than a more distant approach, which (though probably easier to access) risked claiming for myself a breadth of understanding that no outsider (least of all one who has stayed for only two years) could rightfully claim.

None of this is to distract from the achievements of my predecessors who have used more conventional and structured methods to describe life in highland Timor. As mentioned in the previous chapter, into the 1980s the anthropology of

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<sup>60</sup> Barma (2014) characterizes Timor-Leste as a petroleum-dependent rentier state where 'distribution benefits a small and concentrated political-economic elite comprising the family members and business partners, both Timorese and foreign, of senior government officials'.

the island was dominated by structuralist scholars, notably Hicks (2004), Traube (1986), Schulte Nordholt (1971) and Fox (1977, 1980a), whose methodical descriptions of the socio-political structures that ordered customary Timorese politics continue to be compelling and essential to this day. The later wave of anthropologists (which in many ways includes myself) who came after the end of the Indonesian occupation in 1999, often tended to take a more applied approach to their analysis, describing the experiences of individuals and communities as they interacted with development actors and negotiated new ways of being, after decades of war and official neglect.<sup>61</sup>

Responding to the challenge of Geertz, Traube, and Narayan, as well as my own moment of Ginsberg-inspired revelation in the *kios* at Abani, in this chapter I experimentally diverge from more familiar modes of ethnographic style and analysis in order to present two texts that convey life in Timor in a descriptive, narrative form. Although storytelling is central to this method, it is not the be-all and end-all of what I am trying to do. Rather, in the words of Narayan (2012, 20), my aim is to explore the ability of narrative to ‘pose a question through representation’ and embark on ‘an answer through analysis’, albeit with a minimum of overt explanation. The question I am posing here, as I do throughout this study is this: how do *meto* frameworks for living that coalesced in highland villages, continue to be important today, when much of the population, and certainly the locus of political and economic power, has relocated to the relatively cosmopolitan coast? More specifically, I am interested in how, for individuals, the

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<sup>61</sup> See, for example, Bovensiepen (2015), Ingram, Kent, et al. (2015) and Palmer (2015).

socio-spiritual realities of *meto* being are manifested in and through involuntary bodily experiences such as death, illness, and spiritual possession.

The tales I present centre on one of my informants, Jake Lasi, a young man from Oecussi studying geology at the national university in Dili. Although he sometimes expressed his conviction that *meto* perspectives were ‘backward’ (I’m not sure where he learned this English word, but he knew it) they nonetheless continued to physically manifest itself in his life, often traumatically, in a way that rendered the question of whether he ‘believed’ in them was absurd. The first text I present is written from my point of view, drawing on the interactions I had with Jake over several years while in Timor as a UN employee and anthropologist. In the second tale, inspired by Marjorie Shostak’s *Nisa* (1981), Oscar Lewis’s *The Children of Sanchez* (1961) and Cora Du Bois’ *The People of Alor* (1961), I present the reader with Jake’s own words translated from Tetun.

His name was Octobian Oki

I first met Jake in 2011 when I was with the UN in Oecussi. He was about nineteen then – in his last year of high school and working nights at the international base as a sort of mascot/janitor/errand boy. Somewhere in the UN’s tome of arcane rules and regulations there must be one that says you can’t just hire a teenager off the street to mop up after drunken peacekeepers, but the mission had dragged into its fifth year and Oecussi was a long way from anyone that might care, so

they did it anyway.<sup>62</sup>

Until the end of 2012 there was a small UN compound in Oecussi. It had a bar where I liked to shoot pool with UNPOL from Romania and Nigeria, and sink tins of Heineken.<sup>63</sup> Jake helped out there – scrubbed pots in the kitchen, carried messages between offices, and kept an eye on the gym, a stifling room with a set of weights and an old exercise bike, which one of the Jordanian cops used to ominously describe as ‘the house of the pain’. Jake’s English was self-taught and he attacked the language with passion, picking up phrases and words from everywhere then flinging them around until they seemed to fit. A former war hero-turned town drunk and general menace was described as ‘a bandit’. I vividly remember him doing a backflip off his uncle’s fishing canoe while shrieking ‘one for the road’, a phrase he had heard grizzled Australian Federal Police officers slur as they cracked open their seventh tinny of the night and contemplated staggering back out to their Land Cruisers, and had somehow mistaken to be an expression conveying unfettered joy. Later, at a picnic organized by his formidable grandmother, Marta, who since the death of his father in a fishing accident fifteen years earlier had dominated

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<sup>62</sup> After the independence ballot of 1999 there were two distinct UN interventions in Timor-Leste. In the first, between 1999 and 2002, the UN effectively governed the half island and prepared it for formal independence. The second, between 2006 and 2012, was launched in response to the breakdown of law and order and aimed at strengthening the capability of Timorese institutions to operate effectively and sustainably (Butler, 2011). Especially in Oecussi, where the situation had remained calm and crime (other than domestic violence) was very rare, UN personnel tended to be bored and homesick (Peake, 2013).

<sup>63</sup> Peake (2012) provides a vivid account of the bar and its denizens at this time.

the family, Jake trotted out another English expression that amused him.

‘Michael,’ he said sagely as we sat among the clan gathered on the beach that afternoon, a group dominated by drunken uncles who, full of palm wine, were now close to fast asleep under the fronds, ‘life is to be enjoyed.’ I’m not sure where he heard that one; maybe one of the tatty third-hand English language magazines or books he had a way of digging up, but he seemed to mean it. On sparkling days like that one by the water, with Meto moonshine and baked fish, family all around, and the clan’s many happy kids playing soccer, it wasn’t hard to do. Materially Oecussi was very poor in 2011; the economy extended little beyond subsistence farming and even fifteen years after the war of 1999, the landscape was littered with the ruins of burnt houses. Beyond the main town, it was a place of empty roads and dust, and sometimes the people of its villages struggled just to eat, but Jake had a way of facing away from the hopelessness. He didn’t let the seeming impossibility of things get him down.

Later that year one of the uncles, a fisherman and father of twins, drank himself to death. Jake invited me to one of the mourning rites, the spreading of flowers (T: *kari ai funan*) where the family gathers at the grave a week or so after the burial and does just that, although these days the flowers tend to be plastic and made in China. The fisherman’s widow wailed pitifully, but apart from that and some tears there were few overt displays of grief. Jake himself seemed particularly steady. After the killing and starvation of the 1999 war came a long decade of isolation. Although people never reconciled themselves to lives lost through poverty and official neglect, it ceased to be a surprise.

When I left Oecussi in June 2012, Jake went to Dili to study, and was still there on my return two years later. His family in Oecussi was unusual in that it was a matriarchy, whose cast of funny uncles played a supporting role to Avo (grandmother) Marta and starred Jake as the golden boy who was doted on by everyone, although Avo did tend to mix it up with a plenty of scolding and the occasional slap. They had invested so much hope in the kid that I dreaded to think what would happen if any harm came to him there. I was glad to see that, except for his attempt to grow sideburns, he had done well in the city.

As a young man, Jake's success in Dili was an exception. A poorly planned sprawl with a preponderance of tin shacks and open sewers, Dili was a place people were drawn to by some vague promise of a better life, which all too often they didn't find. The former seat of various empires that tended to leave behind piles of rubble, its most defining occupiers had been the Indonesians. Under them Dili expanded substantially and acquired its modern shape, a process that continues to this day with the growth now driven by former farmers chasing a dream or simply looking for a living (T: *buka moris*). As an urban centre it wouldn't look out of place anywhere in eastern Indonesia, but beyond the surface it remains a distinctly Timorese place where old village networks are reworked and distorted but continue to exist, because without them for many it would be very hard to survive.<sup>64</sup> The ruins of war are still there, but have recently become outnumbered by the construction of new Indonesian and Chinese businesses, whose pleasure it is to serve the few who have somehow

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<sup>64</sup> For more on the role of Dili in Timorese development see Moxham and Carapic (2013).

managed to come up on top.

Jake was anything but new rich, although it was clear enough to everyone that he wouldn't be poor all his life and, as a student at the national university, he thrived. Stuck in Dili for a couple of weeks on my way out to Oecussi, I passed the time by volunteering to teach some English classes to him and his mates. It's probably fair to say that they were among Timor's brightest, or at least most determined, and later I sat with them in a smoky little restaurant (I: *warung*) while they tucked into a pile of fried bananas and yelled at each other about politics. The government in Dili had recently ascended to the chair of the Council of Portuguese Speaking Countries (CPLP), an event that made little sense as very few people there, beyond a small ruling class in Dili, speaks that language with enthusiasm or fluency.<sup>65</sup> To make matters worse they marked the occasion by spending millions on hosting the delegates in luxury, including those from little Equatorial Guinea, which is a brutal dictatorship and mostly speaks Spanish not Portuguese, but does have a lot of oil.

For the convenience of the delegates the government had acquired a fleet of 36 new cars (*Jornal Independente*, 2014). Eager to impress El Presidente de Guinea Ecuatorial and other such luminaries, the army and police were deployed to run the thing in much the style of a coup. Roads were closed and green trucks full of rifle-wielding men rushed about on mysterious errands. It was announced that they were cleansing the road (T: *hamos dalan*) for the visiting foreigners. Taxi drivers were threatened with violence, snack vendors were made to

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<sup>65</sup> The question of language in Timor-Leste, especially in education, is a controversial one. For an overview see Taylor-Leech (2013).



disappear, and the municipal garbage collectors were forced to collect garbage. The people of Dili's crumbling streets, shuffling along as always to a cut-price beat that to look at was far more Indonesian than Portuguese, watched with varying degrees of resigned indifference, and perhaps covered their faces to keep out the dust thrown up by the convoys of new SUVs.

Jake and his friends were not among these onlookers. They understood a bit about economics and politics, history, and foreign languages, and saw the occasion as a scam, if not an outright heist. They were all basically agreed on what a disgrace it was, but felt the need to express their rage further by shouting at one another and me about it. Always keen to show off, they started in broken English then switched into fluent Tetun as they got worked up. Interestingly, the aspect of it that really enraged them was the one bit of the thing that I thought they might have liked. Perhaps concerned that the Lusophone worthies would find something odd about a nation where the people ate *nasi goreng* (I: fried rice), were obsessed with 'Indovision' (Indonesian satellite TV), and, significantly, rarely speak Portuguese in everyday life, on assuming presidency of the Association of Portuguese Speaking Countries it was decreed that the rich culture of the *povu* (T: people), not to mention their lively and essentially Latin spirit, would be showcased through a fabulous *carnival* (just like in Rio!!!) replete with people kitted out in their tribal gear, riding floats along the roads where the police had forcibly suppressed anything resembling genuine Timorese street life.

I stood by the road and watched a bit of the parade. Of course, it caused traffic chaos and did seem at times to lack spontaneity, but overall it looked like fun. There were trucks

decorated to look like giant crocodiles and people dressed in the regalia of every district in the country dancing away on top of them. Jake ‘life is to be enjoyed’ Lasi and his studious crew of angry young men buried their noses in their books and, not without difficulty, completely ignored it.

‘This isn’t ours,’ they told me later, at volume, with anger, wanting me to understand – but clearly doubting whether I could really – ‘It’s from Brazil.’

‘Maybe cultures can change?’ I suggested lamely. ‘Borrow from other places? Maybe *carnival* can become a Timorese tradition as well?’

They didn’t push it after that, but it was clear enough what their problem was. They would at least try to speak English to me even if I insisted on Tetun. They were obsessed with getting scholarships to foreign universities. They anglicized their names – ‘call me Freddy’. They ate fried bananas with a scruffy Australian who was claiming to be an anthropologist, whatever that meant. They were not xenophobes, had nothing against adopting aspects of foreign cultures, even that of their former Indonesian enemy, but would only do so on their own terms.

There was a government billboard that appeared around Timor back in 2011 that asked kids *saida mak o nia mehi?* What is your dream? They had plenty, but being a relic of a long-dead European empire on the edge of Asia wasn’t one of them. Having their dreams dictated to them seemed nothing less than an affront to their right to live an identity they felt was truly theirs, and it wasn’t lost on them that the national story was one of striving for self-determination at any cost. That their families in the mountains often went without services like roads, water, and electricity while state money was spent

pampering junketeering Angolans, really riled them.

But, as usual, Jake didn't let it bother him too much. That's what I thought anyway. When they were done shouting about politics, we ordered another round of fried bananas and coffee and talked about football.

The spark that got him to a place that shouldn't have existed with the UN in Oecussi had done Jake well in Dili too. He improved his English to the point where he was eligible for all the international scholarships, and had recently got as far as the final interview for a place at the University of Hawaii. The Japanese took him and a group of other bright young things to Tokyo for two weeks to talk about stuff like soil erosion and urban planning. He came back convinced that the Oki clan of his native Oecussi was some sort of lost Japanese tribe, asking that I, as an anthropologist, look into the matter further. He volunteered as a translator for visiting foreign medical students at a hospital for the very sick and very poor in the Dili suburbs, where he made friends with all the visiting foreigners including US Navy Seabees, embassy people and, he said, a medical student from Singapore who had left in tears and wanted him to visit.

Oktobien Oki (who was not Japanese) used to play football with Jake Lasi on the seafront field in Mahata village, Oecussi. He didn't speak English, or anything much beside Meto, utilitarian Tetun, and a little Indonesian. The outside world, including Dili, was largely a mystery to him. Unlike Jake he had no family with much ability to look after him.

Despite the hunger and disease, the football field by the

water in Mahata<sup>66</sup> was a beautiful place once the sun begins to go down – probably even more so when you’re half-dead from the dust and sewage of some suburb out the back of Dili. Okto and Jake hadn’t been particularly close in Oecussi, although they knew each other by name, and when Jake came into work at the free clinic and saw Okto there, it must have been jarring. The last time they had met was as happy boys playing football by the water in Mahata. Now Jake was well on his way to building a life for himself, Okto was lying half-dead in a free hospital in a slum.

Okto had tuberculosis (TB). The disease is still prevalent in Timor-Leste (Bairo Pite Clinic, n.d.), and he had some advanced and active form of it that, because it had never been treated properly, would kill him soon after Jake found him in the clinic. He had come to Dili, like so many others, to try to make a living, but found that going back to Oecussi without money was nearly impossible. The young people like him flooding into the city were too many, and the young nation’s stuttering non-oil economy had no jobs for them (Horta, 2014). He got by on the fringes, drawing on his extended family

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<sup>66</sup> In 2015 the government demolished the football field and used the land as a place to put dozens of modular accommodation units shipped in at the cost of unknown millions of dollars to house VIPs visiting Oecussi for the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Portuguese arrival. Each block looks like a small shed with an air conditioner attached and various pipes and wires emerging untidily from underneath. Having been used for the week of the festival they are now falling to pieces. Against the strong objections of the community, a nightclub, described by one local as *fo’er* (T: dirty), was built next door. Why the state appears to believe the comfort of visiting VIPs is more important than Mahata’s children having access to open space to play is beyond the scope of this book. The reaction of the community is best described as outraged but resigned.

and others who shared his language and had some sympathy for him, although in the end it wasn't enough.

With Jake often coming in to work at the clinic, he and Okto quickly formed a bond. Through his various endeavours, Jake sometimes had a crumpled five-dollar note in his pocket, more than a lot of others kids his age in Dili, and he'd ask Okto what he felt like eating and then go out and buy it at the *kios* on the road outside. Dusty packets of Indonesian *biskoitu* and dented cans of *stroberry* Fanta – luxury food for boys from Oecussi. Okto was mostly alone in a world he quite literally didn't understand, and it meant a lot to him that there was someone around who knew his language to remind him of better times and familiar places. Jake gave the medical students his phone number and told them that should Okto take a turn for a worse, they were to call him immediately.

One morning he came into the clinic to find that Okto's bed was empty. He rushed off to find the medical student on duty.

'Where's Okto?' he demanded, although he must have already known.

He told me he actually punched the wall, and there did seem to be a mark on his hand. Somewhere out there, on the seafront from which the Europeans used to rule, the CPLP was starting – diplomats were being feted with state-supplied cars, meals, and hotel rooms. They had talking points and tight schedules – there was guff about foreign investment and faith in an economic miracle of some nature. There would have been good explanations as to why all this was for the best. The few times in Oecussi I've seen people dealing with the extremes of grief or pain, they tend to express it with a distinctive shrieking wail that's both universal and unlike anything I have ever heard back home – *hakilar* they call it in Tetun. There would have

been some of that too, in the hospital that the morning the CPLP was about to start, when Jake found out that Okto had died alone.

Jake told me this in a Dili *warung*. I was about to leave for Oecussi and it was just us two this time; his fried banana buddies from uni weren't there and we were eating rice and chicken. When he finished his story there was nothing to say.

Eventually I asked, '*hau bele hakerek ninia naran?*' (T: can I use his name?)

Jake nodded. 'Oktobian Oki.'

I took out my notebook, the dust and sweat leaving a muddy smudge on the page. I wrote, 'Oktobian Oki.'

### The dual utility of ritual in urban Timor

In the preceding chapter I set out how, for the Meto of Oecussi, daily practice often seems to emerge from 'movement' between a highland space where life revolves around *meto* matters of ritual/family/duty/agriculture, and an urbanized lowland domain where money and outwardly orientated aspirations have become increasingly dominant. Okto's story is a confronting reminder of the consequences that can ensue when the mobility that enables this system and the norms of mutual aid embedded in it break down.

In Timor, even in the city, the disposition of ancestral spirits matters. Events that outsiders understand through recourse to empiricist logic are widely believed to be caused by these invisible beings, and urbanization has in no way decreased the importance of rituals intended to ask for their succour. Although the form and content of such rituals vary, they almost always involve the extension of sociality from

the world of the living to the realm of the dead. People return to their clan's *uem le'u* (sacred house, usually in a highland village) to sacrifice an animal and ceremonially share a meal with the spirits while informing them of what has been happening and asking for their help.

Okto's tragic fate throws into relief a function of indigenous Timorese spirituality that has received little attention here or in the literature. The rituals used to seek the help and approval of spirits are essentially those of place and invocation, predicated upon the ability to physically travel back to one's home village and gather there with fellow members of one's *kanaf*. While there are other methods for paying homage to the ancestors, when mobility is restricted (for example the wearing of a pebble from a sacred place around the neck) the act of physical return remains important.

There are two main reasons for this. The first and most obvious one is that travelling to pay homage to the ancestors pleases them and makes them more likely to bestow their blessings on the living. The second, and my focus here, is that when a clan or village are gathered and reminded of their common origins, social bonds and relationships of mutual aid are strengthened. These relationships have always been important (particularly for securing agricultural labour<sup>67</sup>) but have taken on even more significance since the advent of large-scale urbanization. With the non-oil economy very limited<sup>68</sup>, for all but the most gifted or lucky, securing access to a steady

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<sup>67</sup> See Schulte Nordholt (1971, 53–54).

<sup>68</sup> Aside from government spending of oil money and foreign aid there is no large-scale economic activity in Timor-Leste apart from semi-subsistence agriculture. Tourism and coffee have been touted as potential bedrocks of a non-oil economy, but little has come of either (Marx 2016).

state or NGO income means having connections. It was no secret that this was the way things worked.

Several people in Oecussi who had attained wealth, education and status told me that their success over others could only be attributed to them never having forgotten their identity. They would tell me about how they would observe this remembrance through prayer, ritual speech, and animal sacrifice, but it also clearly included an obligation to stretch out a helping hand to kinsfolk in need. For them it was expected that those who could afford to would periodically travel back to Oecussi to give thanks to the ancestors for their good fortune and that if possible, major decisions would be made only after consulting the family's elders, living and dead. In this way, success in the outside world is both enabled by, and allows the perpetuation of, *meto* rituals of place.





*A young man seeks the counsel of his elders before going abroad  
(photo Mike Rose)*

What follows from this, and is consistent with the tragic fate of Oktobian Oki, is that in situations where mobility is restricted, the mutual aid embedded in such *meto* rituals may be weakened. Naturally, people seek alternatives. Jake, for example, could afford to return to Oecussi only rarely, but was able to fall back on his own energetic personality to assemble a network of sympathetic foreign patrons who would, in a pinch, help him out.<sup>69</sup> Others, (see Dilby 2013), join martial arts groups and criminal gangs. Okto, however, was neither

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<sup>69</sup> As of November 2016, Jake was about to graduate as a geologist, but was worried about his career prospects. Deciding he would like to be a diving instructor instead, Jake has been actively lobbying his dozens of foreign friends to chip in the money to pay for his training.

exceptionally gifted academically nor inclined to run with a gang. When I later asked Jake about his connections in Dili, he explained that Okto's immediate family were mostly still in Oecussi. He did have an older brother through whom he found a place to sleep and a way to pick up a little money by helping in a kiosk on the fringes of Dili, but it was a precarious existence.

Given the prevailing beliefs regarding the spiritual origins of illness in Timor, it is likely that some would have attributed Okto's suffering and death to his having become estranged from his ancestors.<sup>70</sup> For an outsider, a more acceptable explanation would be that he had been made vulnerable by losing touch with his living kin, on whom he could customarily have relied on for support. Without them, and away from Oecussi, he was just another kid from the mountains trying to make a place for himself in a poor city. It seems that no one in the small circle of supporters he did have knew to tell him that the reason he was getting sicker was because he had stopped taking his TB medication, and when his illness finally become acute there was little that could be done. In Oecussi, at least as often as they are brought to the hospital, those who seem about to die remain at home. Clinical medical care is seen as frightening and is often, despite the efforts of doctors, associated with death and pain. Many prefer to stay in the village, close to the warmth and quiet of the *tunaf* (hearth) in the *uem suba* (traditional Meto round house) where, if the illness is beyond prayer, at least there is family and familiar surrounds.

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<sup>70</sup> Indeed, when I became ill and consulted an Oecussi 'wiseman' this was his first guess.

Seeking to better understand what urbanization means for the way we die, Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1972, 205) described how the marginalization of customary modes of care can lead to death becoming ‘insulated, technologized and decontextualized’ – a description that is a heartbreakingly accurate way of describing what happened to Okto in his final weeks. It is also worth noting that while irrefutable arguments can be made that technology and a degree of isolation are necessary for the practice of successful clinical medicine, the issue at stake here is not so much the way Okto’s illness was treated when there was still hope of a cure,<sup>71</sup> but the suffering he incurred once the disease had reached a terminal stage.

The Meto, like many other agrarian, communal societies, have only a weak notion of individual privacy. Life is lived in the almost constant company of family and friends. Walking along any Timorese road late at night you will see groups of four or five children sleeping on verandas, all huddled together on the tiles against the slight chill of the small hours. One Canberra winter a Timorese friend told me how he longed to be home, complaining not about the freezing weather, but that *dala ruma hau tuur mesak* (T: sometimes I sit alone). As a volunteer at the clinic, Jake was used to seeing horrifying cases of TB, leprosy, and malnutrition. What he couldn’t accommodate, what drove him to literally punch a wall, is not that he was unable to save his friend’s life, but that he failed to save him from dying alone.

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<sup>71</sup> Tuberculosis is curable as long as the full course of treatment is completed. This usually involves taking a course of pills for between six and nine months (WHO, 2008). In Okto’s case it appears he never finished this, leaving the disease, now partially resistant to treatment, still in his system. Eventually this proved fatal.

While *meto* ritual and the mobility that enables it is often understood by practitioners as a way of reaching out to supernatural beings, in an age of urbanization it is also important as a bulwark against a confusing and indifferent outside world. Through it some of the mutual aid inherent in village life can be brought to the city. In 21<sup>st</sup>-century Timor-Leste, those who lack the resources to engage with the dead, also risk becoming cut off from the vital support of living.

### Spirits, somatic experience, and the limits of belief

The reality that *meto* rituals of place can increase individual wellbeing through strengthening relationships of mutual aid embedded in clan/village identity does not imply that this is how such rituals are understood by their adherents. In Timor, the power of spirits is taken literally, and when I asked people why it was important to pay homage to them, fear of their wrath was usually the first reason mentioned. During two years in Timor, I met not one person who didn't have a firsthand account of the pain and suffering that angry spirits could cause. A frequent theme of my conversations with Jake was this disjuncture between these customary frameworks for understanding the world and the decidedly 'Western' approach to nature ('there's no such thing as ghosts') that was the basis of his education in geology at the National University of Timor-Leste. He wanted to believe what his foreign lecturers were telling him – and sometimes he would tell me that the old ways were nothing but superstition that had to be ignored if Timor was to have any hope of ever 'developing'. On other occasions, though, he would recount tales of people harmed by angry spirits and confess that he was

scared himself. For Jake, the threat of this was particularly acute given that he was studying geology. The indigenous belief system of Timor is sometimes referred to as ‘the rock and the tree’, and for most Timorese there is nothing more perilous than removing stones from the landscape. In Tetun the phrase usually used to explain this sounded ominous: ‘*ita bok rai*,’ (you interfere with the land) older men would say sternly before pausing to let me consider this, ‘*mate*’ (death).

Like Okto, Jake found that moving to the city and reinventing himself as an urban *joven* (youth) did not obviate his corporal vulnerability to the social, spiritual, and economic realities of the village. Here I defer to Jake’s words translated from Tetun in conveying how, as he and his classmates engaged with the land using scientific methods, the spirits attached to it showed they would not be ignored.

### Jake’s story: Atauro

*We are from the National University of Timor-Leste (UNTL) Department of Geology, a new department in 2012. Our principle is to examine the rocks of Timor-Leste and understand the geological process that brought them there. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of December, 2012, according to our academic plan, we went to the island of Atauro for three nights to collect material for our study. We were accompanied by one lecturer from Portugal and one from Timor.*

*When we arrived in Atauro the chief spoke to us and said we must respect the sacred places. After that some people wanted to go swim in the sea with the Portuguese lecturer, others to sleep and others to prepare for the next day when we would climb the highest mountain of Atauro, Manu Koko. After I had come back from the beach I went to buy a pair of sandals, and as I was walking down*

*the road in the darkness someone yelled out ‘Oi, so you students want to climb up Manu Koko, do you?’ I was scared, but that first night nothing happened.*

*The next morning, we got up at five and set off for Manu Koko. It was a long ride in the back of a truck. On the way, we found a rock which was naturally imprinted with a map of Timor. We were accompanied by the chief of the village and some kids who acted as guides to tell us which lulik (T: sacred) place to avoid. Along the way, we stopped and made descriptions of rocks. In order to do this sometimes we had to hit the rocks with a hammer. We ended up damaging some and bringing others down with us from the mountain. As you know Timorese still believe (T: sei fiar) in adat – sacred rocks and sacred trees. If you damage them, you may become possessed or die. This is reality in Timor. But we students of geology must do what the university asks of us and break rocks and carry some back to Dili.*

*Sometimes these rocks are sacred, and traditional people are afraid when they see us doing this. They say to us, ‘hey kids [don’t do that], that rock is lulik.’*

*We tell them, ‘all that lulik stuff, ‘it’s not real. Nature’s never lulik unless you pray to it and make it that way.’ Our Portuguese lecturer said we must bring the rocks back to Dili in order to study them.*

*We quickly did our research and went back down to the sea for a swim. One group stayed behind to take photos of a grotto of the Virgin Mary by the side of the road. An unknown person who was praying there accosted them, saying, ‘hey, what are you doing here?’ They thought nothing of it, and continued walking down the road towards the sea, taking selfies and joking with each other as they went.*

*It was when people from this group were swimming in the sea*

*that the rai nain (land spirits) struck them, specifically a girl by the name of Juanina Belo Ornai. It began with her head, she felt like she had a headache, and then she started screaming and yelling, 'leave me to go back to Manu Koko'.<sup>72</sup>*

*Her friends were shocked. 'God,' they said, 'she's been possessed.'*

*They were also afraid as night was about to fall. They went back to the camp and started cooking dinner. Meanwhile Juanina continued to cry.*

*After we ate we went to bed early. At 2AM and we were all asleep when the land spirit struck again, this time a friend of mine from Oecussi. He threw himself around while squealing and grunting like a wild pig. However, he didn't cry. The spirit stayed inside him for some hours and then left. Someone cured him, we don't know who because it was dark. However, the spirit continued to torment Juanina.*

*The next morning, after we came back from our research Juanina continued to be vicious and angry (T: siak). Even after we were back on campus at Hera (the settlement next to Dili) the land spirit continued to torment her. She kept on begging us to let her go back to Atauro.*

*After one week Juanina's family came to Dili, including her uncle Cosme, who was a typical faith healer (T: ema karismatiko bai-bain) who prays for people who have been attacked by land spirits (devils, T: diabu). They killed a chicken, as in Timorese adat, when*

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<sup>72</sup> For clinicians, spiritual possession of this sort is a particular challenge as it presents as what appears to be a sudden and acute psychotic break. Toome (2013, 7) calls on outsiders who would intervene in such cases to consider of how they might 'take local ways of being seriously' while resisting 'both pathologization or romanticization'.

*a spirit enters someone it must be called out through a sacrifice.*<sup>73</sup>  
*After this Juanina quickly recovered and went back to her studies.*

### Jake's story: Oecussi

*Our research in Oecussi occurred about a year later, in 2013. Six Timorese lecturers and one Brazilian lecturer travelled with us to the enclave. The objective of our research was to analyse Oecussi's geological history, and learn more about the origin of its volcanic rocks. To do this we had to take some rocks back to Dili.*

*The first day we were at the old Portuguese prison (Faut Suba, about 500 metres from town) collecting rocks when one of our friends, Zelia Da Cunha was possessed by a rai nain (spirit of the land). She felt weak and fell to the ground. As we carried her back to the hotel where our lecturer was we noticed her limbs felt cold.*

*She shouted, 'Why have you come here?' We tried to help her by slapping her face to snap her out of it, but she just screamed at us to leave her be. She wasn't speaking Meto, just Tetun. We were afraid so we called four wise men from the community (T: matan dok) to come and see her.*

*That night we sat up playing cards and keeping an eye on our friend Zelia, who despite the work of the matan dok, was still possessed. At about two in the morning she still wasn't asleep and she suddenly screamed, 'Open the door for people to enter.'<sup>74</sup> My friends were terrified. One of them had to go to the toilet but was too afraid to go outside so he peed in an empty room instead.*

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<sup>73</sup> For most, if not all, Timorese peoples, the ritual killing of an animal is believed to 'open the gate' to the realm of the spirits allowing them to be addressed and asked for favours or mercy.

<sup>74</sup> *Loke odamatan atu ema tama.*



*In the morning, the matan dok came back to see how Zelia's condition was. However, she was still possessed, crying, and talking to herself. She was still crying and screaming, days later, when we returned to Dili. Her family was afraid because before Zelia's older sister had also become possessed and then died.*

*When we began classes again [a few days later] Zelia seemed to be a little better and wanted to come to campus with us. Once she was there though she became possessed again, and we had to carry her home. In her home Zelia said 'you haven't returned my rock to where it belongs, so one of you will die or meet with disaster. When you go to do research, I will follow you.'*

*When they heard what Zelia had said the [Timorese] lecturers were afraid. They thought that her presence on research trips would indeed cause disaster and they began to consider whether she might have to leave the geology program.*

*So the lecturers called me and asked me to carry back the rocks to Oecussi. They provided me with money for a ticket and off I went. I was happy to be going back to Oecussi so soon and called Avo Marta and told her I was returning. I travelled along with one of the lecturers and Zelia's cousin.*

*When we got to Oecussi my uncle met us at the dock and we went straight to Faut Suba where we lit candles and began to pray and undertake a ritual.*

*We killed a chicken. My uncle recited the following verse.<sup>75</sup>*

*Ii ho asu, ho fafi, These are your dogs, your pigs.*

*Sin esan nnaon nasanab, They have sinned.*

*Natuin sin monon ma kaak Because they are stupid and confused.*

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<sup>75</sup> Thanks to linguist Owen Edwards for his assistance in improving this translation.

*Es nait neik ho fatu* [They] have picked up your rocks.  
*Ii ho toob*, [Yet] they are your people,  
*Sin nasanab een no sin* They have sinned and they.  
*Neem nabela nfaen ho fatu* Have come back with your rocks.  
*Ho maus* Your riches.  
*Sin nloofh ael nasanab* They have been burned for their sins.  
*Kais amteop sin nai* Don't hit them.  
*Mait maen ho uel* Stay your whip.  
*Kais amteok musike li'aan' ini* Don't beat these children.  
*Laes ja es le' ii toin ja es le' ii* Our words are here; our verse is  
here.

*After he had finished, we took out the rock and returned it to its  
rightful place.*

*Two days later Zelia began to get better, although the lecturers  
were still afraid of the land spirit that had been inside her and the  
threats it had been making so she left the Department of Geology  
and transferred to another university.*

Land as life in Timor-Leste – the embodiment of  
knowing

For Jake and the young geologists of UNTL, scientific methods  
alone are insufficient for engaging safely with the environ-  
ment. Although they are clearly being encouraged to devalue  
the understandings of the land with which they have been

raised – ‘all that *lulik* stuff, it’s not real’<sup>76</sup> – the stories recounted above show that they have not lost their power. In Timor, to this day, ignoring the inspired nature of a place can and does cause plainly observable mental and physical distress. There, the fortunes of nature and the body are often inseparable – and respecting the old ways of understanding spiritually loaded geographies can be a means to care of oneself and others. Though openly dismissive of Timorese perspectives, Jake’s Portuguese lecturer might have done well to remember that it was not long ago that in Western Europe too, the land was something felt as well as measured. Writing as he watched new economies of extraction and value coming to dominate the landscape, German romantic poet Novalis (who made his living working in a salt mine) felt that for all their efficiency such methods missed something essential. ‘Poets,’ he said, ‘know nature better than scientists’ (cited in Bendix 1988, 68).

Three centuries later, the people of Timor are going through their own revolution in the way they relate to their land. While a generation ago all but a small minority lived in villages where everything was named with local words and managed through

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<sup>76</sup> It is hard to hear Jake and his friends talk like this and not think of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s (cited in Alvares 2012, 140) eloquent reflection on the enduring effect of internalized racism in colonial and post-colonial education. ‘It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland.’ For an excellent summary of the literature on this, with particular reference to the work of Franz Fanon, see Mulder 2016. It is noteworthy that the Church also officially rejects the reality of Timorese spiritual beliefs (*lulik*) although, as discussed in Chapter 4, this is generally ignored by the majority of the population in rural areas who see *lulik* beliefs as complementing rather than contradicting their Catholic faith.

the intercession of local spirits, today success has become inseparable from mastering outside ways of speaking, writing, and thinking. The two stories recounted above, situated at this point of encounter and negotiation, are testament to how *meto* attitudes to land and life extend beyond the realm of the intellectual into what might be fairly described as the poetic. While the question of whether local and personally experienced ways of knowing nature are in fact 'better', as Novalis claims is beyond this study, what it does show is that, in Timor, they are deeper. The *meto* relationship with the land is as much a matter of things expressed through the machinations of body, kin, and nature, as 'belief' in the strict sense of the term. While past colonial powers and present-day geology instructors seem to take the lack of a universally comprehensible explanation of *Meto* beliefs as justifying the view that they are not worth taking seriously, where they are blind, and where studies such as this might prove useful, is in seeking to convey how and what *meto* perspectives lack in etic description they made up for in bodily and social affect.

In a sense, then, we might well think of the role of *meto* in the modern day as what I call here an animating interior, and identify this interiority as key to the remarkable way in which highland perspectives have manifested themselves in urban environments where they are not necessarily welcomed or accepted. Given that this dynamic has enabled *meto* modes of being to remain relevant in urban settings, this must be regarded as a positive, but in light of the narrative recounted above it seems appropriate to note that it is not without its internal contradictions and risks. The Timorese approach to the land is defined by pragmatism and flexibility, a tacit acknowledgement that *meto* and *kase* perspectives are situ-

ational and potentially overlapping, even within individuals. In Timor, sometimes a rock is just a rock, and sometimes it belongs to a spirit of the land and may not be touched. There is no fast or empirical way of finding out which is which, and it is thus not possible or safe to engage with a place without taking the time to also know its people and spirits.

Where the potential for harm is located is in the economic/political dominance of outsiders for whom this worldview is manifestly false. In the past, this dominance had a name: colonialism. Now it is perhaps more insidious and structural, but it persists. For Jake's foreign lecturers, Timorese notions of a spiritually loaded landscape were 'primitive' and should not get in the way of progress. And while this position went against the grain of how their students experienced reality, with a respect for their elders customary in Timor, and somewhat in awe of their teachers, this was not a position Jake and his friends felt they could openly question. The deleterious results of this contradiction are all too evident in the story above.

While the Timorese living landscape may be effectively invisible to outsiders, including those who have come to Timor with the best of intentions, to those with origins in the island's mountains, affording it the proper respect is more than important, it is a matter of life and death. To return to the words of Narayan (2012, 68) when it comes to understanding others there are 'things which we can't see but need to know'. The experiences of Jake and his friends throws into relief the relationship between things unseen and bodily experience, and makes the case for their importance undeniable. In the light of such tales, the idea that those who are genuine about

helping Timor's people<sup>77</sup> must take the time to humbly listen to and learn from them is more compelling than ever.

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<sup>77</sup> As opposed to helping their own careers.

## Chapter 3: The ruin and return of Markus Sulu

Commenting on what insights anthropology might be able to offer scholars of international relations and political science, James Ferguson had this to say:

*You look at, say, a country in Africa and all you're able to see is a series of lacks – of things that should be there but aren't. And you end up constructing huge parts of the world as just sort of empty spaces where things ought to be there but aren't. And it leads to a kind of impoverished understanding, I think, because you don't really understand what is going on here. How do people conduct their affairs? How is legitimate authority exercised? How are rules made and enforced? You know, all the kinds of questions that ought to be the starting place tend to disappear or recede into the background (cited in Schouten, 2009).*

For outside observers, the grim truth is that in many ways Timor-Leste is still very much defined by what it lacks. A report by Monash University's Centre for Development Economics and Sustainability (Cornwall, Inder and Datt, 2015)

has 68 per cent of the population living in poverty.<sup>78</sup> In 2016 the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) found that a full half of the population under five years old are stunted due to malnutrition, the highest rate among the world's worst except for Burundi. 'It is hard to imagine' wrote no less radical a source than the *Petroleum Economist* (2013), lamenting what might happen if the nation's finite oil wealth was not invested in building a sustainable non-oil economy, 'that Timor-Leste is anything but a failed state in waiting'.

In 2019, along some of Dili's main roads there is a thin veneer of prosperity. Driving to the airport, it's all there to see: the shopping mall, the 'drive thru' Burger King, and the gleaming glass tower from which those who work at the Ministry of Finance gaze down over the tin shacks and open sewers. Opinions of what it all means tend to be divisive. Some see it as the beginning of a bright new future. Others lament the lack of investment in the non-oil economy and compare it to Haiti.<sup>79</sup>

Seeing it made me think of the title of the speech that Xanana, at the height of his glamour as a recently released political prisoner and warrior poet who wasn't afraid to cry, had given to an adoring audience in Melbourne (people were

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<sup>78</sup> This figure is generated using the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI). The MPI is a tool for assessing poverty that differs from income-based systems by including a range of different indicators of a household welfare including access to clean water, children enrolled in school and employment status (UNDP, 2016).

<sup>79</sup> The poorest country in the Americas. Like Timor it is a formerly forested half of an island that speaks a Creole language and practises a distinctive, syncretic Catholicism. Mired in debt, its political and civic life are characterized by despotism, a thriving aid industry and intractable poverty. See Katz (2013) for a comprehensive discussion of its status.



calling him Asia's Mandela – he didn't mind), 'From the Dreams of the Mountains' (Gusmao & Niner 2000, 236), and how so few of those dreams had come to pass. After fifteen years of freedom, the nation's children were still malnourished while some former resistance leaders and their families seemed to be doing very well (Allard, 2016). People had all sorts of theories as to why.

As Ferguson suggests, state dysfunction does not imply the absence of other systems through which people progress their interests and redeem meaning, identity, and order. What is demanded in considering this, to paraphrase Timothy Mitchell (1991), is a perspective that 'can account for both the salience of the state and its elusiveness'.

Taking up the challenge of Mitchell and Ferguson, and in keeping with the overarching theme of this study, in this chapter I draw on my experience as an anthropologist and someone who has worked within the government of Timor-Leste to show how in Oecussi, these systems incorporate older, indigenous understandings of governance. Understanding the way Timor works today, and indeed seeing it as more than a site of dysfunction, means acknowledging that even within the 'modern' state, local perspectives remain central to how things actually get done.

My argument in this chapter revolves around a case study of the seeming dysfunction of a Timorese government office which I call DSNOF (*Departamentu Servisu no Formasaun* – Department of Work and Training. I have chosen not to use its real name here), where I worked for a year in 2011–2012. I begin by setting out how, although the organs of centralized government are present in Oecussi, their day-to-day operation can only be fully understood through recourse to

local lifeworlds of which outsiders are generally unaware. Narrowing my focus to the office's head, Markus Sulu, I explore the way his authority rested on being able to achieve a balance between the foreign (*kase*) and indigenous (*meto*), and collapsed when this balance was lost.

After being accused of using his position to embezzle money and then publicly disgraced, in order to understand the socio-political context of Markus's shame, I present the history of a *kanaf* whose precedence has remained socially and politically significant into the present day. I describe how his family was able to fall back on their mythic heritage to understand his troubles not primarily as a result of transgression against *kase* law, but as defiance of their own *meto* protocols and taboos (*nuni* and *nonot*). In concluding, I consider how in this way the Sulu were able to exercise a degree of control over an otherwise unbearable situation, and eventually facilitate Markus's atonement and personal rehabilitation.

### Precedence and the modern pegawai

I first went to Oecussi in 2011 to work as an adviser from the ILO within DSNOF. In common with many other government agencies in Timor-Leste, one of the difficulties that DSNOF faced was that few of its employees had a clear idea of what they were supposed to do each day. In theory, there shouldn't have been much confusion. Under the guidance of the ILO, DSNOF had drafted a mission statement that set out one of its main tasks as preparing young people for entry into the labour market by providing them with vocational training, job search facilities, and personalized career counselling. From an organization that mostly did administration, the idea

was that DSNOF would transform itself into a direct service provider and begin operating a series of ‘job centres’, where any member of the public in need of work or training could find help. My mission was to ‘mentor’ those staff members in DSNOF’s Oecussi office who, having been given titles like ‘client manager’ or ‘career counsellor’, were supposed to make this happen.

In reality, I quickly found that the titles the staff had been given were so nominal and removed from the reality of life in Timor-Leste’s *governu* that they often weren’t able to remember what they were. Despite my instructions to drum up enthusiasm for change, it was hard to get anyone excited about the new ideas. It wasn’t so much that no one understood what *jestor cliente* (client management) was supposed to be, it was that no one cared – nor had any real reason to find out. Unsurprisingly, none of the ‘job centre’-related programmes that the ILO was funding there ever took off. As of August 2016, the annex that was set aside for client interviews was a dark place where *funsionariu* dozed at their desks and piles of yellowing forms teetered dangerously next to ashtrays full of smouldering cigarette butts – not an obvious location for sharp information on employment and training. How I managed to spend an entire year there is now hard to recall, although I did write many never-to-be-read reports pointing out that the project presented both opportunities and challenges.

Perhaps the most obvious reason why the ‘job centre’ concept never got off the ground in Oecussi is that there was little formal employment in the district, and the jobs that did exist either demanded skills far beyond those held by

anyone local, or were distributed through family networks.<sup>80</sup> The model the ILO was trying to promote was premised on an assumption, normative to their foreign consultants but patently false to anyone familiar with the day-to-day reality of Timorese life, that it was personal issues keeping people out of work<sup>81</sup> and that available positions would (or at least should) be distributed according to ability. The ‘training’ I was required to provide to DSNOF staff focused on creating plans to address individual ‘barriers to employment’, but this was done despite rather than in a way that accounted for more significant truths such as the barely existent formal economy, or that the few local businesses that did exist saw it as both their duty and plain good sense to hire people they knew they could trust.

Bexley (2009, see also Peake et al. 2014) describes how, instead of being informed by the reality of the situation, many of the foreign advisers who came to rebuild Timor after 1999 viewed life on the island through what she terms a ‘conflict paradigm’. Timor-Leste, according to this thinking, was in need of rebuilding, literally from the ashes, and its people would thus want to forsake anything even vaguely Indonesian in favour of ideas and institutions modelled after those in the West.<sup>82</sup> The situation at DSNOF in Oecussi in 2011 bore this out,

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<sup>80</sup> McWilliam (2015).

<sup>81</sup> Satirical newspaper *The Onion*’s 2010 article, ‘Unemployment High Because People Keep Blowing Their Job Interviews’, effectively expresses how absurd and frustrating this attitude is to job seekers in even relatively prosperous economies.

<sup>82</sup> For more on the difficulties the UN faced connecting with the Timorese population from the very beginning of their mission on the island, see Traube (2000).

with the ILO ploughing money into a programme that seemed to fly in the face of reality and which ignored (or dismissed) Timorese norms regarding the socially contingent reality of job-seeking that had coalesced during the Indonesian era.<sup>83</sup>

Though cognisant of the unworkability of the ILO's job centre concept in Oecussi, DSNOF understandably valued their relationship with the UN agency. For the ordinary *funsonariu*, all that being a 'client manager' meant was having to attend an occasional training session with me. With mains power unavailable during the day, they didn't even have the consolation of Facebook to kill time, so this could be a welcome diversion, especially if the deal was sweetened by the inclusion of internationally funded snacks. Besides, my presence was just part of a package that included access to money. The ILO helped to bankroll DSNOF to maintain an office car (used by the boss), obtain and fuel a new generator (largely for powering the boss's air conditioner), and provide staff with a per-diem payment whenever they were selected by the boss to accompany him on official business outside the town. On a day trip to a highland village to chat with a *grupu* who wanted help to start manufacturing palm sugar for sale in the town market, a one-man job at best, there might be three staff members tagging along with him in order to be eligible for the daily allowance. When the ILO had something to say it was very much in DSNOF's interest to make the effort to appear to be listening. They were happy to have an ILO emblem (along with an AusAID one) on the uniforms they wore to the office.

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<sup>83</sup> As with many aspects of civic and political life in Timor-Leste, the situation regarding employment there is strikingly similar to that prevailing in Indonesia. See Blunt, Turner and Lindroth (2012) for more on the issue of patronage and employment in Indonesia's public sector.

While there is a large body of work describing the Meto as one of many Timorese polities to organize themselves along dualistic lines (see Fox 1989, Cunningham 1965 and McWilliam 1994 for a few of the most notable examples), this literature has largely been concerned<sup>84</sup> with how these socio-political systems operated historically, when state control was weaker and most people still lived in highland villages. I include this recollection about DSNOF in Oecussi because it is a useful example of how this trait has manifested itself in contemporary times. It shows how, in current-day Timor-Leste, identity and practice still stem from the interplay of outward and inward categories with a deeply felt ‘animating interior’ that we might usefully associate with Bourdieu’s (1977) *habitus*, bolstered as well as cloaked by its association with powerful newcomers. Such a state of affairs suggests that, far from being out of date, the insights of mid- and late-20<sup>th</sup>-century structuralist work on Timor’s highland realms remain critical to understanding how power is organized and experienced in the more urbanized and connected Timor-Leste of today.

This is complicated by the reality that the ties that bind customary and ‘modern’ systems of governance in Timor-Leste are, by their nature, difficult to observe. Indeed, at first glance it can appear that the combination of outward and inward elements present in institutions such as DSNOF represent a continuing clash between new and old rather than a creative dyad or site of socio-political emergence.

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<sup>84</sup> McWilliam (1999) and Bovensiepen (2014) provide exceptions – focusing on ‘the transformation of binary identities’ in West Timor and Timor-Leste respectively.

In this chapter I have shown how this is not necessarily the case. Although the *Meto* of Oecussi affiliate publicly with labels that outsiders find comprehensible – Catholic, environmentalist, scientist, teacher or even ‘client manager’ – closer observation usually shows that such identities are lived in ways that incorporate deeper elements contingent on local experience.

One of the things that makes the case of DSNOF in Oecussi particularly noteworthy is that it shows how this ‘animating interior’, though typically associated with the *meto*, does not always draw on elements we might immediately think of as indigenous to the island. There, rather than harking back to the experience of village life or the widespread acceptance of ancestor spirits, the dominant *habitus* of the office seems to have been determined by the common background of the staff either as former Indonesian public servants or being educated in Indonesian schools. At least in this case their rejection of the Indonesian state did not entail the rejection of the norms of governance that had come along with it. As far as DSNOF staff were concerned, their job was to turn up to the office and follow instructions from the boss. If (as frequently happened) no instructions were forthcoming, or the boss was nowhere to be found, the correct course of action was usually to wait and do nothing, a situation that could continue for weeks if not months.

Speaking privately (or drunkenly), foreign advisers nearly always attributed this perceived lack of initiative to laziness;<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Unfortunately, such an attitude is not something only I have observed. Telkamp (1979, 81) remarks on how it prevailed among Indonesian as well as Portuguese colonialists. Appleby (2010, 108) provides an account of the racism common among foreign aid workers today.

however, spending a year as one of the staff (including endless afternoons dozing in a plastic chair while re-reading the office collection of old newspapers) it became clear that such behaviour owed at least as much to respect for the prevailing hierarchy as a lack of energy.<sup>86</sup> Although listening to me tell them about how, now they were client managers, it was important they show individual initiative in following up job leads and training opportunities, the rules governing their behaviour at work were well established and they knew that to actually act this way would be considered inappropriate, if not outright mad. It is telling that twelve years after the end of Jakarta's rule, my colleagues would still forget to use the official Tetun/Portuguese term *funsionariu* and fall back on the Bahasa one, *pegawai*. DSNOF's Oecussi's office had an inner life that stemmed from an originally Indonesian *habitus*, which was overshadowed by their public affiliation with the ILO and its internationalized ideals.

Unlike transgressions that trace their origins to *meto* cultural sensitivities, for example displaying open anger near a sacred house or eating food considered *nuni* to one's clan, going against these originally Indonesian norms does not risk supernatural sanction in itself. Such behaviour would, nonetheless, likely be condemned as 'not right' (T: *la los*) or 'no good' (T: *ladun diak*), a threat to an inwardly determined and deeply felt proper order of things. In this way, a comparison between these systems is not unreasonable. It

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<sup>86</sup> Such a way of work will not be unfamiliar to anyone who has spent time around government offices in provincial Indonesia. For more on the complex issue of authority and opportunity in the Indonesian public service see Kristiansen and Ramli (2006), Logsdon (1992) and Schütte (2015).



is significant that in *Meto* ritual speech, one phrase used to describe correct social conduct is ‘the correct path’ (*lalan maneo*), and both indigenous and indigenized systems are united in their concern with deference to elders, respect for established hierarchies, and a focus on maintaining outward social harmony. While it might not always be obviously *meto*, whatever its origins it seems fair to observe that the ‘animating interior’ in Oecussi is always indigenized.

### The Sulu, their supplicants, and the shame of Markus

I use the case of DSNOF’s Oecussi branch office here as an example of how the characteristically Austronesian, outward–inward structure that defined the organization of *Meto* polities before the expansion of the state in Oecussi continues to influence political life in contemporary times. Today the outward is linked with that which is *kase* or foreign – wealth, political power, and international recognition, while the inner, whether indigenous or indigenized, is usually associated with unspoken norms and the implicitly correct way of doing things, almost always involving quotidian or ritualized displays of deference to those considered to be socially superior. In this section I shift my focus from DSNOF’s staff to the story of their *xefe* (T: boss), Markus Sulu, and how (at least according to certain members of his family) his flagrant rejection of these norms in pursuit of self-interest brought him undone.

Although people in Oecussi rarely acknowledge and sometimes deny the co-presence of *kase* and *meto*, the observation of daily life there provides much evidence that maintaining a balance between them does remain important. Markus’s story shows what can happen when this balance breaks down.

As head of a government department, even a regional one, Markus was a powerful man. He benefited from the moral and financial backing of not just Dili but the ILO and his well-connected *kanaf*, the Sulu. His high status was conspicuous. He drove a car. He had a large private office with an air conditioner. His house had a tiled porch for receiving both guests and the many people who made their way there seeking help and patronage. He owned a busy *warung* (replete with a Javanese woman who cooked) and talked about importing a machine to make *bakso* (meatballs). He convinced the national telephone company to set up its 'community internet centre' in his house where he could use it for free at any time of the day or night. As part of a study-tour organized by the ILO he travelled to Darwin, and was proud of a photo of himself and a collection of other 'job centre' managers taken out the front of a Centrelink Job Centre in Darwin, where he was the only one with the presence of mind not to blow all his per-diem money on gambling, drinking, and shopping at the casino complex. He had an English phrase, possibly picked on the Australian trip, 'the right man for the right job', which though meaningless in Oecussi he liked to trot out as evidence of his *kase* sophistication at village meetings while waxing lyrical about how DSNOF could help. In a place where it is impossible for most people to put on weight, he was stout. When he went to the mountains on DSNOF business he was frequently feted, as befitted a guest of station, with pork, a young man strumming a guitar, and a bottle of the local liquor, *tua sabu*. At one *grupu*, who seemed particularly desperate to secure DSNOF's backing, they filled party balloons with glitter and burst them as he and his entourage walked across the threshold. Everyone clapped.

Later, seeking after his promises, the leaders of the villages Markus had visited would appear at DSNOF. The seats outside Markus's office were often occupied by three or four of them patiently waiting for an audience. The difference in status was clearer in the town than the village. The upholstery and gleaming white tiles of the waiting room were not from the ergonomic world of Oecussi mountain men (*antoin nu'af*) who spent their lives scrambling up and down rocky hillsides. Their bodies were lean and angular and distinct from the soft-bellied office workers in town, and they looked otherworldly loping along past the parked scooters wearing sarongs and sun-tattered shirts, often with a machete slung over the shoulder. Although they were familiar with the politics of clan and village, the details of Dili *governu* and the frequently Byzantine nature of their alliance with *malae*-run organizations such as the ILO was not something they understood. When I asked him, Markus confirmed what I suspected, which was that few of them had a clear idea of what DSNOF was.<sup>87</sup> What they did know, and what was important, was that Markus was from the government and that (it seemed reasonable to hope – governments had been known to ...) he could help them secure access to tools, training, and employment.

Markus's role then was essentially that of a bureaucratic alchemist who was able to reach into the miasma of foreign words and ways that defined the *kase* world in order to bring forth treasure that reinforced his standing in the *meto* one, all the time framing his actions in different ways for its representatives. His understanding of the alphabet stew

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<sup>87</sup> The fact that the name was in Portuguese, a language few in Oecussi had any detailed understanding of, didn't make things any clearer.

of ILO-supported employment and training programmes was not perfect, but it was enough. There was money for establishing small businesses, upgrading the equipment of village agricultural collectives, sending people to vocational schools and helping disabled people in ‘the workplace’, which to me always seemed like a wrongheaded way of referring to a swidden garden (*lele*). Each one had its own bewildering acronym. Getting this money required filling out of endless forms, arranging the visit of technical experts from Dili, and general politicking that could go on for months and was something only Markus had the authority to coordinate. While the ILO may well have thought that the funds they were giving DSNOF were being used ‘professionally’ to help all-comers find gainful employment (while suspecting, perhaps, that some of it was being skimmed off through ‘corruption’<sup>88</sup>), the reality was far more complicated. The village leaders who went to Markus for help saw themselves as beneficiaries not of an international effort to improve their quality of life (for they had no real way of clearly understanding what DSNOF and the ILO were, or why foreigners could possibly be interested in whether they got a new fishing net), but of a relationship, absolutely local, they had cultivated with a powerful individual from a powerful family. Formerly, the Sulu clan (like all powerful *kanaf* in western Timor) had been feared for taking the heads of its enemies.<sup>89</sup> Now, in a way, they still wielded power over life and death. For his part,

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<sup>88</sup> Although there is consensus that official corruption is damaging to almost every aspect of the nation’s development, efforts to increase state transparency are stymied by a range of complex systemic challenges. See Blunt (2009) and Bosso (2015).

<sup>89</sup> See Middelkoop (1963) and Roque (2010) for more detail on this practice.

Markus would have denied that he was anything less than an absolutely professional public servant. But the young people who preferred to approach me rather than him for help told another story.

‘Speak to the *xefe*,’ I would tell them. ‘I’m just an adviser.’ But usually they preferred not to, telling me that without a personal connection to him or his family it was a waste of time. They believed that, while those favoured by Markus might get a new fishing net, a sack of peanut seeds, or a job, those who were not would get nothing. Whether this was accurate was hard to know. All I could see with certainty was that when I left in July 2012, Markus was a man whose opinions and time were sought by many.

It was 2014 and I was back in Australia when I heard that Markus was looking at jail time. It surprised me, as when I left in the middle of 2012 he had been doing better than ever, his star rising in the government, his businesses thriving, and mind ticking over with new ideas. There was talk about promoting him to head office in Dili or even finding a scholarship for him to study overseas. The ILO liked his energy and penchant for thinking outside the box.

The story that did the rounds was this. Each month Markus drove to Dili to get a cheque from DSNOF to cover the office’s operating costs. Perhaps after being tipped off by an Oecussi *funsonariu* who was tired of not having an operational budget, DSNOF noticed that the person cashing the cheque appeared not to be Markus but a man no one had heard of from a remote village in Oecussi. DSNOF immediately dispatched an investigative team, who quickly discovered that this man was a farmer who might have never been in a bank, let alone had recently travelled to Dili. It transpired he was one of

the hundreds who (without really understanding what they were doing) had provided their documents to DSNOF when its representatives had arrived in his village with the usual swag of promises about a bright new future and an invitation to register as 'job-seekers'. It was alleged that Markus somehow used the farmer's documents to cash the cheques, seemingly in the hope that, if he were caught, then the farmer would take the blame. If it was true, it was not a clever scam. According to a source with knowledge of the investigation, when first confronted with this accusation Markus denied everything but later admitted there might have been some 'confusion' and repaid the money.

I didn't recount this version of events to Markus when I got back to Oecussi in the middle of that year. Late one evening soon after I arrived, I found him in his now-empty *warung* opposite the DSNOF office. Two years ago it would have been buzzing with customers, but the perception that he had stolen money and tried to pin it on an old *atoin pahan* (farmer) had rendered him a *persona non grata*. Besides, the Javanese guy next door (a friendly and energetic man who quickly taught himself Tetun) had better food. Markus made some effort to get his rival deported but he no longer had the influence he once did, and it came to nothing.

'Markus,' I said as he glumly shook my hand, 'it's been a long time. I heard you had some troubles.' I didn't believe the story that he had just got out of jail. His pale puffiness was that of a recluse rather than a prisoner. He had vanished for a while after the incident went public, probably staying with relatives in Dili. On return he had kept to his house. He knew what people thought of him and was hurt by it. Now, across the sticky tabletop, he mauled the gristle on a satay stick and

eyed me warily. A flying ant vainly trying to drag itself out of the satay sauce pooled on the plate completed the scene.

‘*Bosok teen!*’ (T: lying shits) he hissed alarmingly. ‘Who’s been speaking to you? What have they been saying?’

I could have answered ‘everyone’ and ‘that you’re a criminal’, but decided to take a softer approach. ‘No one, really,’ I lied. ‘I saw a newspaper article on the internet.’

This seemed to upset him even more. He leaned towards me across the table, snatching up another satay stick as though he might use it to skewer the offending reporter. ‘That journalist is a liar, Mike. They’re all liars. It’s all political. People are jealous (T: *laran aat*) of us. It’s a *conspirasaun*.’

An uneasy silence settled across the nearly empty restaurant. I thought of how busy it had been before. He used an elbow to jab at the plate where the flying ant had lost its struggle with the *kecap*.

‘You want satay?’

‘Thanks.’

It was poor-quality meat, mostly ligament. Beef and pork were both expensive, sold only at the Saturday market, so Thursday’s meat likely came from an almost week-dead cow. Most places got around this by using chicken. Once this too had been a rare luxury. Someone had to not only kill a valuable bird but also go to the trouble of gutting and preparing it. Now it came conveniently frozen, packed and shipped in all the way from Brazil<sup>90</sup>, and tasted delicious if you could manage not to think about the cruelty and growth hormones and lack of a

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<sup>90</sup> See Westmoreland (2009, 153) for a brief discussion of the economics of chicken meat and other imported products given Timor’s lack of a manufacturing base.

cold-chain, but somehow Markus didn't even have that. All that was on offer was a few sad-looking trays of fried fish and wilted vegetables. There was no doubt that Markus was being punished. The salient question was, I was to discover later, punished for what?

'All Timor knew about the Sulu'

For outsiders, there was little mystery about what had happened to Markus. Individual greed seemed the most plausible explanation, although his claims of a *conspirasau*n by mendacious rivals could not be ruled out. Publicly, his family accepted his pleas that the accusations levelled against him by the state were false. It was only later I began to understand that for many, the question of Markus's guilt in the empirical sense was less important than the observable fact that he was being punished. It was an open secret that others within the government were running similar rackets, and yet he was the one being prosecuted. What this told the Sulu was that, regardless of whether he had taken the money, Markus was guilty of something far more serious than simply misappropriating funds. Recourse to the *meto* was a way of understanding what it was that he had done wrong.

Although it quickly became clear to me that his family thought Markus's ill-fortune was punishment for transgression against customary taboos and protocols, the nature of exactly what he had done took longer to emerge. True, with his car, big house, and constant business ideas he came across as a self-made man, but in itself this was not forbidden. The Sulu were perhaps Oecussi's most urbane and outward-looking clan. Originally from the high *kuan* of Tek Ana (Little Stomach)



in suko Lekot (not its real name) they were one of the ‘old fathers’ who were believed to have come to the land first and were well known to its oldest and most powerful spirits. On ritual occasions the Sulu were described as *mafefa*, the mouthpiece of the prince (*naijuuf*) in his palace (*sonaf*) in the lowlands, invested with the right and duty to ‘call the people together’ at his bidding or in times of war or trouble. As such they had always been at the sharp edge of political life (often literally), sometimes resisting the foreigners and their attempts to extract sandalwood from the mountains, at other points attempting to make themselves stronger by cutting deals with them and adopting elements of their religion and technology.

Although their land is relatively isolated, the Meto have a history of appropriating foreign ideas and technologies in ways that have proved transformative. Traditionally inhabiting small hamlets (*kuan*) in the island’s rugged interior, its sandalwood and beeswax meant that Timor did not go unnoticed by those looking to profit from South–East Asian trade networks. Maize and muskets introduced by traders revolutionized Meto ways of life and war, and precipitated the spread of Meto-speaking communities throughout the western half of the island (Fox 1988). Both Schulte Nordholt (1971, 189) and McWilliam (2002, 162–164) have noted that the political life of Meto villages is frequently concerned with the incorporation of newcomers from other domains, ‘wandering people’ (*atoin anao-mnemat*), into local economies and social structures, often through marriage.

The incorporation of outsiders into indigenous religious and political systems throughout Austronesia has previously been noted. Fox, writing of the Meto alongside other eastern

Indonesian societies, argues that this is a pattern best understood through the lens of 'precedence', which he describes as a 'socially asserted claim to difference' that groups often use to support their arguments for superiority (Fox 1996, 134).

Although the Meto have always been concerned with precedence and rank, until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this was rarely manifested in visible material difference. While successful clans did have greater access to cattle, beads (*eno*) and ceremonial currency (*loit*), the value of such wealth was in facilitating marriage alliances between families.<sup>91</sup> From day to day, everyone lived an outwardly similar lifestyle regardless of their status. This began to change in the 1950s. At this time the Portuguese authorities, noting that the Sulu were aristocrats of some sort (there is no evidence to suggest they acquired anything but a rudimentary knowledge of the Meto political system during their often nominal five-century-long presence), began to teach their sons to read and speak their language. This education was typically followed by low-ranked service in the colonial army and bureaucracy.<sup>92</sup> Elements of the Meto elite started to 'become *kase*', learning Portuguese, wearing trousers, spending time in Dili, and

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<sup>91</sup> For a comprehensive treatment of ceremonial exchange and marriage alliance among the Meto, see McWilliam 2002a.

<sup>92</sup> Compared to its other colonies, Portugal's attempts to foster a sympathetic Lusophone elite in Timor was short-lived. It is noteworthy that is the only one of Lisbon's former colonies where Portuguese language was never adopted by a significant proportion of the population. See Shah (2014, p60–61) for a more detailed discussion of this.

educating their children.<sup>93</sup> In this way much of the material inequality visible in Oecussi today is a continued manifestation of clan hierarchies that first coalesced in a bygone era of semi-independent highland *suko*. While in 2016 many descendants of the lower-ranked *kanaf* of Lekot were still illiterate swidden farmers, most descendants of the Sulu boys educated in the 1950s and 1960s live in Pante Makassar, where they are known for their nice houses, influence in government, and master's degrees.

What is key is that while the daily lives of the lowland-dwelling Sulu are *kase*, they understand their prosperity to be dependent upon continued connection with and respect for the *meto*. Their successes are now as likely to take place in Dili as in Pante Makassar, but this is still attributed to a good relationship with the ancestors, and must be followed up by travel back to their *uem le'u* (sacred house) to sacrifice a pig and give thanks to the ancestors for their continued support. The foremost Sulu patriarch, Carlos, told me of how as a young man in the 1980s, he neglected to do just this after securing a sought-after position in the Indonesian public service and was debilitated by agonizing and mysterious abdominal pain that only abated after he returned home to pay his respects.

The children of Carlos (Markus's cousins) largely echoed his thinking on this, although as a result of having been born in the town and educated in Indonesian schools, their way of expressing it was different. Working largely with the older generation Fox (2006a) and McWilliam (2009) characterized

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<sup>93</sup> The concept of an elite in Timor-Leste has been a complex and shifting one. See Da Costa (2006) for a thorough account of how it has evolved in keeping with the island's shifting political fortunes.

Austronesian origin tales as ‘topogenic’, that is partially mnemonic narratives through which it is theoretically possible to map a clan’s long journey across the island of Timor. The accounts the younger Sulu of today tell are distinct from these in that they are simpler, with the detailed knowledge of place names either confused or lost due to their replacement (or co-option by) modern political boundaries and transportation networks. Nonetheless, it is significant that this loss of detail appears not to have reduced the utility of Meto origin tales as the frame for understanding the world. While Carlos, talking to me in the capacity of his status as a Sulu patriarch, expressed only concern for Markus’s welfare, the younger generation felt no need to hide their belief that he had brought his problems upon himself.

‘But do the ancestors blame (T: *fo sala*) someone for earning lots of money?’ I asked one particularly angry-seeming cousin (though even he wasn’t prepared to acknowledge the possibility that Markus had actually done the wrong thing), going on to put it to him that the feeling among younger members of the family that Markus was getting what he deserved might partly stem from jealousy.

The cousin was good enough not to throw me off his porch but instead asked his wife to make another cup of coffee. There was a lot I didn’t know.

*This happened more than 1000 years ago.*

*In ancient times (T: *ul-uluk*), somewhere in West Timor three young women lived near a spring in the forest. Every day, when they went there to fetch water, they saw the footprints of a giant bird.*

*One day the three girls hid in the forest to see what this bird was. Eventually it came to drink. It was a very large black wild bird (T:*

manu fuik metan) from the forest. As it bent down to the water, they leapt out and grabbed it.

As they held the struggling bird they were astonished to find that it could speak.

*'Please,' said the bird, 'give me some water.'*

The two older sisters said that not only should they not give it water, but they should beat it to death on the spot. The youngest sister disagreed. She thought they should give it something to drink.

So the youngest sister put some water into a leaf and lifted it up to the bird, which used its beak to poke a hole in the bottom of it. The water spilled all over the bird, making it wet and transforming it into a handsome young man.

The Sulu of today are descended from the youngest sister and the man who was a bird. This is why we never eat chicken.<sup>94</sup>

I thought back to 2012. Most days, as far as I could see, Markus's restaurant had been full of public servants making the most of earning a wage by ordering big plates of rice with fried chicken. Making money for himself, Markus seemed to be announcing to his family, was more important to him than upholding his clan's most significant *nuni* (food taboo).

Having chicken on the menu wasn't the only way in which Markus's restaurant upset the Sulu, living and dead. His

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<sup>94</sup> Each clan in Ocussi has a food taboo (*nuni*), which is traced to an event in its legendary past. The ways in which *nuni* are observed differ from clan to clan. For most families, simply not eating the taboo food item is enough; being in proximity to, or even selling it, is okay. In this regard the Sulu take an unusually doctrinaire approach; many of their houses stand out for the lack of chickens pecking around. Selling them was obviously beyond the pale, and Markus knew it. For a broader perspective on food taboos throughout the archipelago see Forshee (2006, 136–138).

cousin told me a longer story that explained how, by opening his restaurant without consulting the family's elders about what to name it, Markus had insulted the legendary hero whose exploits were believed by his clan to still be the basis of their worldly success:

*This is the history of the Sulu clan, the original people of Oecussi. According to the grandfathers, before the Portuguese our ancestors ruled. They ruled the dry land, Oecussi, from Kefa to Kupang and Noi Muti. Their stronghold was the mountain fortress of Bo'en. The other kings of Timor, they all knew about the Sulu.*

*The Portuguese came with newcomers by the name of Da Costa, Hornay, and Da Cruz. These people are the Topasses. They served as translators to the Portuguese.*

*The Portuguese sent the Topasses ahead of them from Flores to look at Oecussi and see if they could come. The Topasses tried to crush Oecussi so my grandfathers fought with them until they ran away back to Larantuka in Flores and told the Portuguese of their troubles. Then the Portuguese together with the Topasses made war against Oecussi. At that time my grandfathers moved into the mountains of Oecussi [to the stronghold and sacred place of Bo'en], and people began to refer to them as mountain men (Atoni nu'af). The Topasses and the white foreigners entered into a conspiracy to oppress them.*

*And what was the name of my ancestor who resisted the Portuguese? Kolo M'nasi (Old Bird). The white foreigners together with the Topasses, they caught and killed him. After his death, Kolo M'nasi was known as Tua Mata Sulu, he is our great ancestor, and from him we get our clan's name, Sulu.*

*The Topasses killed Mata Sulu because he was organising the eight mountainous suco against the malae (T: foreigners). He didn't like the foreigners because they were stealing the*

sandalwood trees to sell to the Chinese and oppressing the people.

So, the *kaes muti* and the *Topasses* came up with a plan to kill my grandfather. They seized him and tortured him and finally tied him to a dog and threw him into a pond full of crocodiles. They said to him, ‘if you are truly a king (*usi*) tomorrow we will come back and you’ll still be alive, if you’re not the crocodiles will get you.’ And the next morning the dog was dead, but *Kolo M’nasi* was sitting on a crocodile.

Today the place where this happened is called *Mata Haat* (four springs). Why? In the morning when they saw *Kolo M’nasi* had survived being thrown to the crocodiles my ancestors came to the pond. They were carrying gongs and drums (*sene* and *kelu*) and hit them four times. This caused four springs to issues forth from the ground. Today this place has many rice fields.

And still they couldn’t kill *Mata Sulu*, and so he said to them, ‘you can’t kill me, because I am the lord of the land (*pah in tuan*). If you want to kill me you must follow this path’.<sup>95</sup> He told the *Topasses* that they must find a sandalwood tree and whittle it down, until what was left of the trunk was long and thin with a sharp tip, and then place his anus on top of it, pulling him down until its tip emerged from the top of his head.<sup>96</sup> The place where this happened is now called *Mau Molo* (yellow grass).

They had killed him facing west, towards the setting sun, towards *Oemolo* and said, ‘if he was truly a king tomorrow he

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<sup>95</sup> When I asked why *Mata Sulu* was willing to volunteer the information that led to his demise it was explained to me that the *kaes muti* were holding members of his family hostage, and if they had been unable to kill him, they would have killed them instead.

<sup>96</sup> *Farram* (2004, 90–91) and *Forbes* (1989 [1885], 474) report that such punishments were prevalent throughout the island throughout most of the colonial period.

*will be facing the rising sun, facing Dili.’ And sure enough, when they returned the next day he was facing the east.*

*Beginning from the death of Kolo M’nasi the land of Oecussi became hungry, the rain didn’t come for eight years. The rivers and springs dried up. So, the murderers who had conspired with the white foreigners to kill him suffered terribly. And what happened? Da Costa, Hornay and Da Cruz, who had been together with the white foreigners when they killed my grandfather, now they fought over (T: hadau malu) who would be king. In the end Da Costa won and became king, and then, because they didn’t like the white foreigners either, forced them to flee to Dili.*

*After the foreigners fled to Dili Da Costa dominated Oecussi, although the highland suko continued to resist him. They ruled through intimidation and torture and made the people of Oecussi slaves. From this time, each year people had to send tribute of food, a practice that continues to today.*

And the place for which Markus named his restaurant – the same as that from which ‘Old Bird’ had once ruled over Timor and whose heroic death (temporarily) drove the Portuguese from Ambeno – Bo’en. The restaurant was actually called Bo’en Tuan, with the word ‘Tuan’ indicating that he was its lord and master.

‘He just called it that without asking anyone,’ the cousin said, shrugging his shoulders with what could have been resignation or disgust.

Whether Markus stole money from the government was impossible to say. Not in doubt, however, is that he had transgressed against the ways of his family, and that from their point of view this was the root of his problems. Understanding Markus’s struggle as a primarily *meto* one was thus more than just a way for the family to achieve clarity about what had gone



wrong. In the next section I discuss how, by framing what had happening in *meto* terms, the Sulu were able to rehabilitate Markus in a way that would have otherwise been impossible.

### Rain and money: *meto* tales as a way of controlling *kase* fortunes

In the highland realms described by Schulte Nordholt (1971), Fox (1996) and McWilliam (2002), socio-political order was justified by reference to ritual origin narratives. These were recited only when representatives from all the village's *kanaf* could be present so that they could vouch for the narrative's truthfulness and, by extension, the validity of the hierarchy it served to explain and justify. The account of Usi Mata Sulu above can be considered a modern-day version of such a tale, and its recital by an individual rather than a ritual speaker attributable to 2016 being a far more individualistic age. That it served as a way of explaining Markus's dramatic fall from grace shows how *meto* frameworks for understanding power and fortune remain relevant, with control over modern institutions and economies understood as requiring continued observance of *meto* taboos and social protocols. Those who are inclined to flaunt these responsibilities find themselves blamed for any bad luck that they (or other family members) encounter, a dynamic that effectively limits the ability of individuals to deny the relevance of *meto* ways to modern life.

While no other *kanaf* shared their stories with me in the same detail as the Sulu, everyone had them, and of the people I knew with a fondness for telling me about their family history, there were few who didn't mention that, at some stage in the distant past, their ancestors had been people of

authority and importance. Those from the highlands liked to tell me, with only the fuzziest of details, that they were the original people of Oecussi (T: *ema asli Oecussi*). The Sulu's neighbours in Lekot, the Teme, were slightly unusual in that they made no claim to have had powerful ancestors. Having been last to enter the land they had never shared same status as their neighbours, and thus had not benefited from the still perceptible head start in adjusting to foreign ways that the Sulu got during the 1950s.<sup>97</sup> According to the Sulu, long ago they were allowed to settle in exchange for acting as guards, and to this day their sacred house is literally lower, situated on the hot plains beneath the Sulu's mountaintop stronghold. The Teme countered this by saying that although they came last it was they who brought corn, rice and (in one version that was roundly condemned as 'idiotic' (T: *beik*) by everyone I mentioned it to), Catholicism to the island, and that before then people had lived 'like animals' in the jungle. Asked about this, Carlos said that the Teme were lying, and that I should be careful as there were lots of stupid people out there who would say anything (T: *koalia na-naran deit*). Significantly, the people who liked to tell me about these stories also tended to be the sort of ambitious individuals who were always chasing waged work and education, and believed that eventually the glory days would return – a modern version of them enabled by the accumulation of *kase* education, money, and power. For the Meto of today, it seems, spoken tales of the past can be as much a way of coping with the present and maintaining hope

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<sup>97</sup> Despite this they have produced one particularly successful (and somewhat infamous) figure, Jorge Teme, who served as Timor-Leste ambassador to Australia from 2003 to 2007.

that their fortunes will change for the better, as remembering what came before.

Although it may seem counter-intuitive, the relocation of the Meto elite from highland *sonaf* (palace) to coastal *kantor* (I: office) appears to have strengthened rather than weakened this perspective. In the *kuan*, life was relatively simple. Although dramatic and unusual events did sometimes occur – incursions by the colonial army, a war with the neighbouring tribe, earthquakes, dramas over infidelity or access to land – like farmers everywhere, the better part of their anxiety and ritual effort was concerned with the agricultural cycle, especially the weather. Too much rain, too little rain, rains that came too early, too late, or persisted for too long could prevent the maize from growing to maturity or ruin it on the stalk and condemn everyone to near starvation. Even in the town, among office workers who no longer relied on the harvest to eat, the weather was commented upon constantly and with concern.

It seems clear that, despite ameliorating most concern over hunger, *kase*, money, and technology have brought their own uncertainties and unknowns. How else to explain, the Sulu might ask, the tragedy of a dedicated and honest public servant such as Markus who was merely trying to serve his country when he was turned upon by both his employer and the law? Furthermore, even if (and for them it was a big if) there had been some ‘confusion’, he remained a person of standing in his *kanaf* whose fortunes reflected on them all, and no amount of rumour or murky accusations from the government or gossipy townsfolk could change that. Continued acknowledgement of the *meto* as definitive in the *kase* world provided a way of understanding what had gone wrong, and how to fix it.

Markus fell from grace because, in pursuit of money, he had mocked his clan not just by selling their totemic bird, but by using a name associated with their heroic forebear to do it. The question of whether he was a thief was not the most important issue. Understanding Markus's problem as one stemming from the *meto* thus became a way of thinking about and re-establishing control over a situation that would have otherwise been unbearable.

## Conclusion

Despite Markus's sometimes brash approach to acquiring wealth and power, he had been a friend, and it was difficult to watch a man of my own age who everyone had believed was headed for great things so reduced in circumstances. We were in touch only sporadically after I reconnected with him at his restaurant, but Pante Makassar in 2014/15 was a hard place to keep secrets. Not long after we spoke, he was stricken with a sudden paralysis of the legs<sup>98</sup>, and even those who had been sceptical could not deny that his problems were somehow associated with the realm of angry spirits. The assistance he received from the elders of his *kanaf* appears to have not only revived his power to walk, but also sparked a broader

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<sup>98</sup> Paralysis is a classic sign of spiritual anger in Timor, although an outside observer might well understand such symptoms be a physical response to intense guilt or distress. See Chapter 5 of this book for another detailed account of this. Interestingly, the former head of the Church in Timor and vocal supporter of Catholic orthodoxy, Carlos Belo (2001, xix) appears to reject the spiritual explanation for such maladies, writing instead of the prevalence of 'psychosomatic' illnesses caused by economic stresses such as unemployment.

restoration of his fortunes. On their advice he stopped selling chicken and without the offending item on the menu, they seemed happy for him to continue declaring himself master of Old Bird's stronghold. Through a less transparent process, by the middle of the year he was back at DSNOF, admittedly as a lowly *funsonaru* rather than the *xefe*, although with the new boss in no position to insist on him turning up to work, this provided him with time and money for his own projects. Not half a year after I had met him as a semi-recluse who believed that they were all out to get him, I stood outside his home listening to him explain his latest business venture and why it involved him parking a mechanical digger out the front of the 'community internet centre'.

Markus said he wasn't in favour of the mass demolition of trees and homes that went along with the 'urgent' construction of a highway and international airport for the enclave's malnourished goatherds and swidden gardeners, but all that rubble presented a business opportunity he just couldn't ignore. Besides he had family involved – he didn't go into the details. He had also made the acquaintance of a Chinese businessman who, he said, wanted to set up a factory making triplex in his home village. In one end would go the fibrous rubble that remained of people's living fences (*baha 'honis*), palapa huts, and coconut trees, out the other would come cheap building materials, which could be sold back to them at a profit. He explained that, although it was true that one day there would be no more ruined property left to recycle, at that time they could start tearing up the remaining woodland. He didn't find my objection that people needed it for collecting firewood a convincing one.

'Michael,' he said with mock admonishment, presumably

because it was just the type of objection one might expect to hear from a foreigner, 'if you think like that we'll never have development.'<sup>99</sup>

In this chapter, as in the one before it, I have made a case for the continued importance of spiritualized customary authority within and through contemporary forms of governance in Oecussi. Although the state and its employees have much to gain by promoting themselves as aligned with internationalized ideals regarding 'good governance' and 'development', my case study of the relationship between DSNOF and the ILO shows that irrespective of outward affiliation, deeply felt Timorese logics of authority and precedence remain essential to the everyday experience and practice of government there. This situation is a contemporary variant of the outward-inward structure long recognized as characteristic of customary Austronesian political systems, including that of the *Meto*.

Building on my theme of how life in Oecussi today is often defined by the work of negotiating a relationship 'between *kase* and *meto*', the case of Markus's rise, fall and return shows how the ability to exist within this liminal space is often central to how people in Oecussi act in and understand the world. While portraying himself to the ILO as an energetic cadre in the service of its ideal of 'decent work for all', it is noteworthy that none of the programmes that Markus was working on for them ever gained traction in the district. Rather, what the resources put at his disposal did achieve was the perpetuation of already existing and decidedly non-egalitarian patterns of precedence and patronage through which *kanaf* Sulu had long

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<sup>99</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of the often complicated dynamic between foreign aid donors and their Timorese partners see McGregor (2007).

maintained its superiority over others.

Although Markus's fall, when it came, was seen by most outsiders as a fairly transparent case of corruption, that his family preferred to frame it through the lens of their past shows how *meto* perspectives can be used to preserve a sense of control and understanding over even the most difficult of problems thrown up by the *kase* world. As for Markus, for all his confidence in himself as an independent man with a handle on matters of money and government, he was eventually compelled to accept that the *meto* was not something he could choose to disbelieve in, and changed his behaviour accordingly.

For development actors who have come from elsewhere, the question of why Timorese government institutions sometimes behave in ways that seem out of step with their declared commitment to international standards has often proved puzzling. The ILO, looking honestly and clearly at the results of their investment in Oecussi's DSNOF office, would be hard pressed not to see it as a failure, a symptom perhaps of the seeming lack identified by Ferguson, and yet they might do well to note that their money did not vanish into a vacuum. Simply glossing any use of funds that does not conform with the expectations of international donors as 'corruption' or 'waste' provides little ground for understanding how such local/global partnerships might be made more effective in the future. It also raises uncomfortable parallels with the conduct of colonial powers who similarly tended to see Timorese socio-political systems as in need of reform or replacement. We can only hope that through the study of how older patterns of authority remain relevant to the work of the state in Timor today, there is the potential for such misunderstanding to be

lessened.



## 4

### Chapter 4: Angry spirits in the special economic zone

Building on the idea developed in the two preceding chapters that the spiritual and socio-economic realities of *meto* life can be manifested through somatic experiences such as spirit possession, illness, and death, in this chapter I draw on the notion of affect to query specifically how these perspectives might complicate the logic of top-down, investment-driven economic development.

Despite the familiar potholes and dogs dozing complacently on Pante Makassar's main thoroughfare, as I began my fieldwork in Oecussi, plans were afoot to remake Oecussi as a hub for foreign investment, the Zona Especiais de Economica Social de Mercado (ZEESM – Special Zone for Social Market Economy). In 2013, it was announced that Timor-Leste's Oecussi enclave would become the site of its first special economic zone. The programme is intended to transform the enclave into a regional transportation, industrial, and tourism hub through a massive programme of infrastructure construction and foreign investment.

Despite beginning with high hopes, by May 2015 serious concerns had been raised about the appropriateness of ZEESM's conduct, most significantly including the large-scale, uncompensated acquisition of land and the fostering of an atmosphere described by one focus group as characterized by 'violence instead of consultation' (Meitzner Yoder, 2016b). In this chapter I set out to sketch something of how the *Meto of Oecussi* think about and experience their environment (*pah meto*'), a task lent urgency by ZEESM's resolve to remake their land in line with capitalist principles privileging international investors and cadastral land management.

To this end, I draw on the concept of 'geographies of affect' (Lea and Woodward, 2010; Massumi, 2002), a perspective that conceptualizes 'place' as a dynamic way of 'knowing, seeing, and sensing the world' that both affects and is affected by human experience (McClellan 2011). Anthropologists such as Csordas (1994), Waquant (2004), Jackson (1995, 2005), and Desjarlais (1992), who have similarly been concerned with the complication of Cartesian divisions and have written on how ethnographers might use their own somatic experience to understand the lives of others, have also proved an inspiration. Using these tools to discuss the beliefs through which the *Meto of Oecussi* tend to experience the land, I suggest that ZEESM's conduct is what Scott has described as 'high modernism' (1998, 87), a process whereby indigenous perspectives are devalued by authorities intent on a technologically advanced tomorrow. In *Oecussi* the persistence of local custom<sup>100</sup> as

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<sup>100</sup> For more on the resilience of Timorese customary ways of living in the face of those who would change them see McWilliam (2008) and Barnes and Fitzpatrick (2010).

the primary way of experiencing, attributing value to, and managing land, has up to now allowed people to control their lives and maintain a degree of social and material security that may well be lost as homes and gardens are acquired and destroyed.

Living in Oecussi, I was struck by how the Meto spoke of the land as something they ‘watched/guarded’ (*pao*) rather than owned, with a good harvest and good health usually explained as being contingent on their relationship with the ancestral and elemental spirits (*nitu* and *pah tuaf*) understood to be present. Their experience of local geography, it seemed, went beyond its physicality or utility as a means of subsistence, but was central to their perception of reality. This affect was not something I was immune to. While much of my work in Oecussi was defined by the conventional stuff of ethnographic fieldwork – taking notes, asking questions, conducting interviews – through living there I also came to assume elements of an arguably Meto subjective, including suffering a life-threatening illness that was attributed to a malevolent spirit and addressed as such, becoming invested in the fortunes of swidden farming villagers as they waited anxiously for the rains, and forming relationships with people devastated by fear they would lose their land. The contrast between ZEESM’s land as property model and the Meto tendency to experience questions of land, spirituality, health, and personal fortune as inseparable<sup>101</sup> became something I felt, as well as observed.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Allerton (2009) provides a useful overview on spirituality and landscape in Southeast Asia.

<sup>102</sup> Material from this chapter was adapted for a paper in the *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*. See (Rose 2017b).

Within this context, the willingness of Oecussi folk to (privately) attribute a series of strange and disruptive events believed to have occurred on construction sites associated with ZEESM to the agency of these spirits, was something I came to understand. Backgrounded by this understanding, and extending Scott's concept of 'everyday resistance' (1985, 33), I argue that in Oecussi today spirits are not apolitical, and in fact are sometimes perceived by the population as acting on their behalf against powerful outsiders they are otherwise unable to oppose – a *Meto* way of challenging authority that is in keeping with their encounters with past colonial regimes.

### ZEESM – Timor's special economic zone

In early 2013, it was announced by the government of Timor-Leste that Oecussi would become a special economic zone,<sup>103</sup> and that the area would be 'developed' into an industrial, tourist and transportation hub (La'o Hamutuk, 2015a). ZEESM has stated that the cost will be USD 4.11 billion, of which only 1.36 billion will consist of direct state investment, with the remaining 2.75 billion coming from unidentified private investors (Bano 2014, 5). It differentiates itself from similar projects by use of the term 'social market economy', a concept that aims to use 'free market capitalism toward the end of social development' (Meitzner Yoder, 2015, 301) although what that will mean in Oecussi is unclear. As of May 2016, a new power plant, a park commemorating the arrival of Portuguese explorers and the renovation of the town's seaside

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<sup>103</sup> See Farole and Akinci (2011) on the human and environmental toll of special economic zones.

promenade had been completed. Other projects, including a luxury hotel, an international airport, irrigation channels, a bridge, and the widening of the district's main road remain in progress.

Of all the work being undertaken, the road widening is the one that has had the greatest impact on the community. Deemed necessary to facilitate the large-scale economic expansion ZEESM envisages, it will remake Oecussi's core thoroughfare, originally a single-lane road of the sort found throughout rural Indonesia and suited to the needs of the mostly agrarian population, into a dual carriage highway. To this end, from the Indonesian border at Sakato to the inland market of Pasar Tono, approximately 30 kilometres through the district's most populated area, virtually every roadside structure, tree, and house has been demolished. It is worth noting that very few people living in the enclave own cars.

In the seaside village of Mahata, approximately four kilometres east of Pante Makassar, most only realized how this aspect of the programme would affect them directly in mid-2014 when stakes were placed on their property indicating where the road would go. Buildings in its path were sprayed with numbers indicating they would be demolished at an unknown future date. As late as April 2015, Mahata residents still said they understood monetary compensation would be given for privately owned land, as well as small houses and fruit trees. Those losing larger houses would be given assistance to rebuild their homes. No firm dates were given for the demolitions to begin. In May, heavy machinery descended on the Mahata and began to destroy the trees and gardens either side of the road. By November 2015, the process was almost complete with all roadside fruit trees, fences, gardens, and

houses demolished. Assurances that money would be paid for demolished fruit trees and small structures were apparently false. The delivery of funds and materials for rebuilding homes was in many cases delayed, with families forced to live in makeshift shelters in the interim. Meitzner Yoder (2016a) reports that the cash payments that were eventually delivered only covered 15 to 25 per cent of construction labour. Throughout lowland Oecussi, residents remain deeply insecure about their tenure on the land they have remaining and the viability of their communities.

### High modernism

The use of terms such as ‘development’ and ‘progress’ to justify the displacement of the poor is common enough to have its own acronym, DIDR (development-induced displacement and resettlement). Research by De Wet (2006), Janaki (2012) and Terminski (2014) has demonstrated the tendency of massive state-sponsored infrastructure projects to exacerbate existing structural inequalities, with Koenig (n.d.) neatly capturing the outcome of such schemes in her observation that ‘those displaced by these development initiatives rarely benefit from them’.

Grappling with why this tends to be the case, James Scott famously described the state imposition of schemes intended to bring ‘backward’ populations into a bright new future, as ‘high modernism’ (1998, 87). He explains how its proponents have argued that rational thought and scientific laws provide ‘a single answer to every empirical question’ (3), and in this way justify their rule over those with less formal education. In the case of ZEESSM it might be argued that ‘foreign investment’

has been added to the list of panaceas. The land will be made comprehensible to outside capital, and the resulting influx of funds will improve the quality of life of its residents. ‘Those who through retrograde ignorance refuse to yield to the scientific plan’, Scott writes, ‘need to be educated to its benefits or else swept aside’ (94).

‘But they were there illegally’ one well-meaning technician told me when asked about ZEESM’s policy of demolishing local homes in the name of development. He was referring not to the residents of Mahata, but to people living in Oe-Upun, a hamlet of about twelve huts that had been removed to make way for a luxury hotel. The technician didn’t mean badly, but he had been raised to not question maps and written laws, which in this case stated that the land wasn’t theirs. It is with the confusing reality of those directly affected by ZEESM that I have tried to engage – a focus not on the zone itself, but the felt experience of those living where it will be built.

### Oecussi’s indigenous political/spiritual system

Until around 60 years ago, most Meto lived in small mountain hamlets (*kuan*) where they grew maize and rice in swidden gardens (*lele*).<sup>104</sup> *Kuan* were grouped together in semi-independent princedoms known as *suko*, ruled through a dual system in which a hereditary prince (*naijuuf*) was supported by hereditary ‘priests’ (*tobe*) with responsibility for the cycle

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<sup>104</sup> Apart from Sakti (2013), Meitzner Yoder (2007a, 2007b, 2011a, 2011b, 2015, 2016, 2016b) and Johnson (2015) there is little published literature on the Meto of Oecussi. Schulte Nordholt (1971) and McWilliam (2002) have produced detailed monographs on Meto socio/political life in neighbouring Indonesian Timor.

of harvest rituals. Most *suko* were home to as many as nine different clans (*kanaf*), each of which held a distinct part in the village's ritual and political life, and maintained separate 'sacred houses' (*uem le'u*). Contact with the colonial government was usually mediated through a Portuguese-endorsed king (*usif*) to whom villagers would send tribute in food and corvée labour.

Direct governance by Indonesia ended the rule of the *usif*, but the *naijuuf/tobe* system remains important to how the Meto tend to conceptualize the land. To this day, the idea of land as a saleable resource is very rare in the mountains and is not common on the coast. While the issue of who has a right to a particular garden plot is usually established by reference to the father or grandfather who cleared the land, a deeper history of legendary ancestors remains important as the socio-spiritual framework within which access to land, and increasingly other resources, is shared.

The villages I know best, Kutete and Mahata, provide useful examples of this. Kutete is a typical highland *kuan*, some three hours walk from Pante Makassar. Mahata is a peri-urban settlement, mostly inhabited by families from Kutete, which has slowly grown over the last five decades as highlanders have relocated to the coast in order to access employment and education in the state capital. Kutete has around seven clans, each with a separate sacred origin story and corresponding role in the village's ritual practice and customary political structure. The *naijuuf*, for example, is always from clan (*kanaf*) *Lasi* who, though not one of four founding families (the 'old fathers', *aam nasi'*), at some undetermined period in the past (*un-unu'*) seized control of the land from *kanaf Eko*, who to this day are referred to and respected as the old princes (*naijuuf*



nasi'). The descendants of clan Kolo are said to have been in the area even before the aam nasi', and their resulting connection with its potentially dangerous elemental spirits is why they serve as *tobe* (ritual priests). This interaction is characteristic of the eastern Indonesian polities described by Fox (1996, 134; see also 1980a, 1988, 2006b) where the idea of precedence, a 'socially asserted difference that generally affirms form of superiority and/or priority', is important. It was explained to me that today the principles of mutual support and harmony embedded in this system are more important than the maintenance of the old hierarchies. The ancestors want the villagers to work together (in Meto to 'sit together', *mtook mibua*, and think with 'one head, one mind', *nekaf mese*, *ansaof mese*'), so the crops are brought in and life will continue be sustained. Unwillingness to help a neighbour in need (especially with agricultural labour), or behaviour that creates discord (such as theft) is taboo, not just because of the social disruption it may create, but because may provoke the ire of the ever-watchful ancestors, who can make their anger known through bad weather or sickness.

In lowland settings, this principle extends into other forms of mutual support. Still identifying with the clans of Kutete, it is taken for granted that Mahata residents will welcome their highland relatives into their homes and, if asked and able, offer them land to build houses of their own. In the next portion of this chapter I explore how, despite the increasing assertiveness of the lowland state, the way in which the Meto of Oecussi understand and interact with the land has remained defined by indigenous principles of mutual aid and land sharing rather than commodification and the exchange of money.

## Growing food and relationships: Meto land practices

The first major effort to replace Meto customary land practices with an outside system occurred during the 1970s and 1980s. During this time the Indonesian government measured the smallholdings of Mahata residents and distributed certificates of title.<sup>105</sup> Despite this, Meto notions of land have remained nested more in local custom than any sort of state-endorsed system of values or laws. The story of the Ena family from Mahata is illustrative of this way of thinking.

Like most of her generation, Jake's grandmother and matriarch of the Ena clan, Avo (Tetun: grandma) Marta was born in the highlands. In the late 1940s, her father travelled down from Kutete to coastal Mahata. Although the land was recognized as being within the domain (*sopu*) of Kutete, it was mostly uninhabited and thought to be haunted by dangerous *pah tuaf*. Marta's father didn't survive long on the coast, although before he died, he managed to claim an area of land beside what is today the coastal road by clearing it and planting a garden. Worried about Marta's future, her father's brother arranged for her to stay at a boarding school run by nuns from Portugal and Dili. Though terrified at first, after settling in she learned to read, speak Portuguese and Tetun, and to use guava to make the nuns' favourite, *marmelada*.

When they marry, Meto women customarily leave their natal clan and relocate to their husband's village, but there are many

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<sup>105</sup> Accounts of exactly how this occurred remain contested. Some say that Indonesian surveyors favoured Mahata residents who had proved themselves amenable to the new regime; others that this is simply jealous talk from people who missed out, and that the distribution of title was carried out apolitically.

exceptions. In Marta's case the man she married had fled his family home in Indonesian Timor, apparently after a violent family feud, and so they settled among her family in Oecussi instead. It was only in the late 1970s, as their family started to grow, that a house was built on the land her father had claimed decades before, which until then had been used mostly for raising maize.

Despite the changing nature of the lowland economy and government, to this day the status of Mahata as part of the old domain of Kutete remains central to the politics of movement and settlement in the village. ZEESM's destruction of homes and gardens stands out as the most forceful attempt yet to spatially reorder the community. In explaining their highland origins, Mahata residents spoke to me of how the majority of families there were descended from people who, like Marta's father, had moved to the coast in the decades after the Second World War. Originally this movement appears to have taken place at the urging of the *naijuuf* Lasi, who feared the Portuguese would settle the area if his people didn't, although later it was driven by overpopulation in the highlands and people pursuing education and employment in the town. Although Mahata is now home to many from other parts of Oecussi and Timor-Leste, this is reflective of growing connections between the original inhabitants and newcomers, who through marriage and friendship have been granted permission to settle or live as part of families originally from Kutete.

The story of how Marta's family came to put down roots on their plot of land is an example of this process, and the persistence of Meto attitudes to land ownership in the face of **bureaucratized** and monetized perspectives. Not long after

they built their house in the late 1970s, the Indonesian government arrived to measure their land and provide the family with a certificate saying that it was theirs under Indonesian law. Overnight their land became legible to the state, measurable in metres, and valued in rupiah, but for the Ena clan it made little difference. They continued to understand the place they lived as theirs by *Metu* custom, vested with the spirits of their dead and the potential for the cultivation of relationships, plants, and children – land defined by its affect, experienced as part of life itself rather than a way of making a living.

None of this should be read as implying that the Ena had a static relationship with their home, but change came relatively slowly (see Fox 1988), usually mediated through their background as highland animists and agriculturalists. Marta's garden (largely now the government's road) is a case in point. I listed over 30 different types of useful plants there – everything from the ubiquitous maize (*pena'*), to the rare and valuable sandalwood tree (*hau meni*) to the custard apple (*hau ata'*) – prized both for its fruit and the medicinal properties of its leaves. There were flowers said to have grown from a cutting brought long ago from Portugal, jack fruit donated by the Indonesian agricultural development agency during the 1980s, and maize planted as it always had been, from the seeds hung from the mother pole (*nii enaf*) of the sacred house to which the mature sheaves were returned each March in the feast of the new corn. The garden could be a place of connection with the ancestors as well as physical sustenance. When one of the cows they kept out back died and then Marta was taken ill, they added a *hau mone* (male pole), an altar where the ancestors could be placated through the burning of

candles and offerings of betel nut<sup>106</sup> and palm liquor.

The Ena also used the land as a way of forming relationships and alliances. In the mid-1980s, an Indonesian police officer stationed in Oecussi, a Catholic from neighbouring Nusa Tenggara, asked Marta and her husband if he could build a house on their land. The family granted him permission, and over the years they became close. Despite the fact Ena had been granted 'legal' ownership and could have rented it to him, they didn't ask for money. When I asked Marta why she had granted him the right to settle she simply said that even back then she believed there would eventually be a war. That this explanation was completely self-explanatory to her suggests how customary thinking about land has remained relevant. One of the dominant themes in Meto historiography is that of wandering strangers received by autochthonous people.<sup>107</sup> By giving land, wives, and authority to these outsiders, the indigenous line may have lost a degree of physical authority, but nearly always retained a position of sometimes difficult to define but nonetheless important social/spiritual

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<sup>106</sup> Keane (1997, 265), writing of nearby Sumba Island, describes betel nut as 'the most common instrument of everyday sociality', an observation that holds true in Timor also. The term 'betel nut' is slightly misleading as the nut actually comes from the areca palm (Latin: *areca catechu*, T: *hau buah*). Betel refers to the vine leaf (Latin: *piper betel*, T: *malas tahan*) that is chewed along with it (Winn 2006, 132). Despite this, in the English language literature (see for example Meitzner Yoder 2011a, 17) the word 'betel' is widely accepted as referring to both the palm tree, its nuts and the practice of chewing them along with *malas tahan* and powered limestone (T: *ahu*). I have followed this usage throughout this book.

<sup>107</sup> See Schulte Nordholt (1971, 189) and McWilliam (2002, 162–164) for further discussion of the incorporation of newcomers into Meto domains.

superiority.<sup>108</sup> Cunningham (1965), Schulte Nordholt (1971), McWilliam (2002) have provided comprehensive accounts of this dynamic at work in a historical context. What the story of the Ena clan adds to the literature is an account of how it has continued as a way of ordering sociality up to today. In Marta's hope that by allowing an Indonesian policeman to settle, her family would be provided with a degree of protection from political strife<sup>109</sup>, we have an example of how the Meto of Oecussi still use the land to grow useful relationships just as they use it to grow food.

Proponents of the sort of high-modernist development currently taking place in Oecussi have been known to argue that 'things have to change'. What this description of the Ena and their land shows, is that things were changing (even, if you like, developing), albeit in a way in a way directed by the indigenous population according to their needs, and not likely to increase the wealth of the national elite. While ZEESM may have been conceived as a way of bringing beneficial economic growth to the enclave's residents, the programme almost completely ignores the frameworks for managing land and life that are already there. The assumption that a road always is superior to a garden appears to be one that has gone unquestioned.

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<sup>108</sup> See Fox's (2006b) article, 'Precedence, Diarchy and Stranger-Kings in the Timor Area', for a comprehensive description of 'precedence' in the Eastern Indonesian region.

<sup>109</sup> Marta wept as she told me that when war did come in 1999, although the policeman did what he could, the militia still burned down their home along with the rest of Mahata.

## Affect, angry spirits, and resistance in Oecussi

In Timor-Leste, most rural (and many urban) people relate to the world through a concept known in Tetun as *lulik*. Ethnographers of the country (see Hicks 2004, 25; Barnes 2011, 38; Molnar 2010, 98) have glossed the term as meaning 'sacred', a definition Trindade (2011, 16) has extended with his argument that it encompasses 'the spiritual cosmos that contains the divine creator, the spirits of the ancestors, and the spiritual root of life including sacred rules and regulations that dictate relationships between people and people and nature'.

Writing on West Timor, Schulte Nordholt (1971, 147) and McWilliam (2009, 113) have identified the Meto word *le'u* as having an equivalent meaning. Although the spiritual beliefs and ritual practices of the Meto in Oecussi were originally indistinguishable from those of their cousins in Indonesian Timor, Jakarta's disapproval of *adat* as incompatible with the state-authorized visions of modernity (Davidson and Henley 2007, 10) and more intensive missionary efforts have caused their nature to diverge, with *le'u* beliefs being far more openly expressed in Timor-Leste. Even those who briefly visit the district notice the many *uem le'u*, distinctive round houses that serve as ritual centres, shrines for deceased relatives, and granaries. *Hau mone* (male poles) – three-pronged wooden altars where offerings can be made to the ancestors – are found near most homes. In addition to such man-made loci for worship, certain rocks, springs, trees, caves and stretches of river are also considered *le'u* and cannot rightfully be entered without the permission of the area's guardian (*tuan*). While my informants told me that swidden gardens (*lele*) and wet rice fields (*aen oek*) were generally not *le'u* as such, it is believed

that should the spirits become irritated by conflict in the village or neglect of ritual duties, the crops grown there would fail to thrive or wither before harvested.

Animal, human, spirit, plant, or rock – in Oecussi, reality tends to be vested in the relatedness rather than the discrete properties of such categories, a mode of experience that analytic techniques assuming a clear division of person and place are of limited utility in understanding. More useful are approaches that borrow from the literature on ‘affect’, which explicitly acknowledges this relationally, and a dynamic Vannini (2015, 9) describes succinctly as ‘the body’s capacity to be moved and affected, and the body’s capacity to move and affect other things’. Given that most Meto understand this connectivity as being mediated by the agency of spirits that think and feel, Thrift’s (2004, 60) perspective on this is particularly useful. ‘Affect,’ he says, ‘is a different kind of intelligence about the world’. For the Meto this ‘intelligence’ is shaped by an observable socio-spiritual framework, and in this section I shall attempt to sketch something of its outline and colour.

The two types of spirits known to Oecussi villagers, *nitu* (ancestors) and *pah tuaf* (land spirits), are not the same. As spirits of the dead, *nitu* can be communicated with through divination rituals and placated through offerings. Although the Church is known to discourage belief in them, in daily practice the ancestors were described to me as ‘close to God’ (*paumaak Uis Neno*), and thus beseeching their intervention through an offering of betel nut and ritual speech at the *hau mone* is considered to be essentially a form of Catholic prayer, and something that even the most conventionally pious openly engage in. Unlike the saints, when forgotten or disrespected,



the wrath of angry ancestors can kill, but still they want what is best for their village and though wary of change, if asked humbly they will often acquiesce to innovations such as the building of a new road or the use of modern materials in the construction of a sacred house. *Pah tuaf*, by contrast, cannot be reasoned with. They are *fui*, wild. There is little consensus as to what they are, although in an interesting parallel with the partial conflation of saints and ancestors, the word *diabu* (Tetun/Portuguese: devil) was sometimes used by those trying to explain them to me. I was warned to stay out of the forest after dark lest I be bitten (*sau*) by one. Typically, they are associated with specific places – stream crossings, stretches of trail or patches of forest, and while wayfarers are rarely at risk, those travelling alone, at night, or using the land to undertake any kind of work are. Both out of respect for the land's owners and concern for their own safety, Meto usually ensure that if they have cause to live or work on land outside their own territory, they seek first the blessing of locals who can advise them of what precautions should be observed. For most Oecussi folk, the presence of these spirits is not a question of belief but an evident fact of daily life, and virtually every hamlet has wise men and women (*ahinet*) who can help divine exactly what *le'u* forces are behind a misfortune or illness.

Despite their dangerous nature, spirits can also act as guardians. One well-known story from the war of 1999 has pit vipers setting upon the pro-Indonesian militia. More recent tales have revolved around the ZEESM. In January 2015, an expensive ceremony held in Lifau to mark the beginning of the programme was washed out by an unusually long and violent storm. A large tree fell and crushed an empty tent

set up to house VIPs. Afterwards, it is said, two security guards went insane.<sup>110</sup> Nearby, the construction of the luxury hotel at Oe-Upun mysteriously halted. Why, no one knew for sure, but there were lots of stories – illness and bad omens had plagued the project since it started, a live chicken had somehow been unearthed from under the ground, the Singaporean site manager had suddenly died. And although such stories were easy to discredit using positivist logic, they were nonetheless believed by most I spoke to, to be the work of angry ancestors or land spirits who would not be ignored.

The disconnect between these ZEESM attempts to measure and manage the land using cadastral and fiscal tools, and affective local perspectives nested in Meto sacred knowledge is especially striking given that so many of the functionaries charged with the programme's implementation are from Oecussi. Locals close to the project were willing to admit that the potential spiritual retribution invited by ZEESM's conduct made them frightened (*T: tauk*), but only privately. Mari Alkatiri is from Dili and had gone so far as to say bluntly that that Meto needed to start looking at the land as a resource that can provide income (see Meitzner Yoder 2015). Publicly aligning with ZEESM's internationalized vision for the enclave was necessary for securing access to sought-after jobs; however, this is not to say this vision was widely accepted. Rather, although they were not part of the official discourse, Meto explanations of the apparent mishaps on ZEESM sites were the talk of the town. Those who recounted them to me

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<sup>110</sup> 'Insanity' (*namaunu le'u*), may be the most common affliction attributed to spirits. Rodger, and Steel (2016) provide an in-depth account of spirituality and mental health in Timor.

didn't do so with satisfaction exactly, but it was clear that in some sense they did feel validated by what was happening. You can't mess with the land (*T: bok rai*) and expect to get away with it, they said. The result would be death (*T: mate*). The land demanded not just respect but consultation and deference, and if attacked it would defend itself.

In a sense the exclusion of indigenous perspectives from public discourse regarding ZEESM has resonance with Scott's (1985) classic analysis of peasant resistance in 1970s Malaysia, *Weapons of the Weak*. He characterizes small acts of individual rebellion – petty theft, private mockery, slow encroachment upon state land as 'everyday resistance', ways of fighting back used by those for whom direct confrontation is unthinkable. While recognizing that such acts may represent individuals pursuing their own interests rather than those of their class, he maintains that their persistence and effectiveness in tempering the hegemony of landowners is 'testament to human persistence and inventiveness' (33). Like the Malaysian peasants to whom Scott refers, the people of Oecussi are also faced with a force that seems indifferent to their interests and cannot be openly confronted. The difference, perhaps, is that most Meto believe that even if they are prevented from acting personally, spirits inseparable from the land are willing and able to exact vengeance.

Such perspectives have been recorded previously in the literature on Timor. McWilliam, Palmer and Shepherd (2014, 1) write that in Timor, spirits are understood as both facilitating their earthly kin and directly expressing their own will as 'agents of resistance'. In a similar vein Bovensiepen describes how, among the Idaté of Manatuto District, belief in a geography of ancestral spirits means that the 'potency of

the land may be appropriated for protection' in times of war (2011, 56).

Methodologically, the challenge posed by the similarly affective nature of Meto geography and experience was not a matter of my informants being secretive. People were eager to discuss these strange events and share their theories on what was happening. Rather, the problem was a niggling feeling that an analysis of these beliefs that fully explored their power and relevance demanded a sort of informed imagining of what it meant to live in a world of watchful, interventionist spirits. Latham and McCormick (2004, p 706), building on the work of Massumi (2002) describe affect as a force that is visceral, felt, and relational, but the question of how (or even if) it was possible to access that feeling was one that did not easily present itself. I had read some of Loic Wacquant and his gripping account of life in the boxing gyms of Chicago, of how 'boxing "makes sense" as soon as one gets close enough to grasp it with one's body' (2004, 7), and though it put me in mind of Harrison's argument that we might think about questions of body and place by considering the 'susceptibility of corporeal life to the unchosen and the unforeseen' (2008, 427), Wacquant (it seemed to me) had the advantage that the life of the gym was one in which he could participate almost fully. Even though I was privileged with access to many of the sacred places of the Meto, for much of my fieldwork the felt reality behind the ritual that took place there seemed beyond me. That my perspective on this would be changed by what felt like a frightening and painful encounter with the spirits my informants were talking about was not something I saw coming.

## Illness, anxiety, and affect in an inspirited land

Towards the end of 2014 in Oecussi, I became very ill. An out-of-control infection invaded my foot and quickly began spreading up my leg. After lying awake for nights in agony, I went to visit Avo Marta to ask if she could call her neighbour, a well-known *ahinet*, to look into what was going on. Starting with questions about my family and what I was doing in Oecussi, he began to intone my possible transgressions while rolling his machete between his hands (*benas keo*). His first guess was my late grandfather was angry that I had left Australia without seeking his permission, but it was only when he suggested my deceased neighbour, a man named Miu Da Cruz, was unhappy I had moved into the area without his permission that it spun like a top and clattered to the ground, indicating that we had struck the truth.

Typically, it was explained that the illness was my own fault. I should have known better than to move into a new place without seeking permission (*toit lisenca*) to be on the land. Miu was angry, and my suffering was caused by the bite of a spider he sent because of that. The *ahinet* set up a small altar in my house so I could burn candles and placate Miu by letting him know he wasn't forgotten.

It took me about two weeks to recover and when I did, I was emaciated, pale, and shaky. The change wasn't just physical; I came out of my illness with something that had previously eluded me, a sense of the nature of the affect that the land held for my Meto neighbours. While before I had just watched them paying respects at their *niut nate* (graves), their *hau mone*, their *fatu le'u* (sacred rocks), and their *gruta* (T: grottos), now in all sincerity I joined them, placing a Catholic icon in front of

the altar that Tua Koa had set up, burning a candle every week or so just as he advised me to, even shedding a few tears for no reason that was clear to me but was perhaps gratitude at still being alive. ‘The body is the site of affective transmission’ writes Johnson (2015, 387; see also Davidson and Milligan, 2004), and at least in this case it had been. Through a process that was somatic rather than intellectual, and at a level that was barely conscious, I now understood something about how my neighbours saw the world, which before I had not. What I had been unable to intellectualize, but had come to understand through affect, was that in a world where the land is inseparable from ancestral and elemental spirits that can kill or cure, the idea of a clear divide between body and place is not possible. Almost anything can be tied back to the land, or more specifically, the way people conduct themselves in relation to it. In Oecussi, people are constantly aware of this and even when breaches of the proper way don’t cause illness or misfortune, the anxiety that they will remains strong.

The key here is that for most in Oecussi, wrongful conduct with regard to the land can be experienced as anxiety and physical suffering. There were many Meto with a scientific understanding of the natural world beyond mine, but as I discovered, understanding things scientifically, perhaps even accepting that spirits are not behind everything, is not the same thing as feeling that this is so. And while the term ‘geography of affect’ may not be one in wide currency outside the academy, it is still important in writing about Oecussi (or indeed, enforcing a massive programme of ‘development’ upon it) because it is a concept through which we outsiders might understand that for most Meto, the distinction between land and self is rarely a clear one, and that to ignore this

reality is to be complicit in a long and continuing history of outside domination whereby local perspectives on land and life have been devalued. When land and body are hard to distinguish, what outside planners may see as beneficial economic development might well be felt as sickness and fear of death.

## Conclusion

In *Stepchildren of Progress*, a study of a village in Sulawesi where residents were being driven off their land by a mine, Katherine Robinson (1986, 293) makes a case against the high-modernist assumption that economic growth necessarily benefits everyone. Writing about life on the ‘undeveloped’ capitalist periphery is a valuable task, she argues, in that it helps us to balance the promises of ‘development’ with the things it would change, or even destroy. Inspired by her reasoning, this chapter aims to question, through its description of the affective geography that sits at the heart of Meto experience, the idea that ZEESM’s vision is one that is necessarily appropriate for the area, or likely to be in the best interests of its citizens. My case study of the Ena shows how what is described as ‘development’ might be more honestly termed replacement – a process through which local modes of production, meaning, and adaption are displaced by ones that are under the control of outsiders. The justification for this appears to be the idea that it is objectively better to live as subjects of a globalized, cash economy than any other way.

Although what is happening in Oecussi can and should be considered through widely comprehensible questions of law and money, this chapter argues that a full and respectful

engagement with the population must acknowledge the profoundly affective nature of the Meto relationship with the land. More than simply a place for growing food, raising children, and building alliances, the land is experienced as inseparable from the self – a mode of being that is difficult for non-Meto (including me) to grasp but which, through my discussion of the strange events on ZEESM building sites and my own encounter with what was identified as ancestral spirit, I have attempted to sketch. It can only be hoped that the idealistic sentiments expressed by ZEESM about working with the Meto as partners extends to respecting the economically inconvenient reality that for many, land is more part of the self than a resource that can be traded for money or given up for the good of the nation state.



## Chapter 5: Stones, saints and the 'Sacred Family'

In the first chapter of this book I introduced the terms *meto* (indigenous/familiar) and *kase* (foreign) and explained how in Oecussi these concepts are used to make sense of life. McWilliam (2007b), Richmond (2011, p 117) and Traube (2007) have noted how the advent of independence in Timor-Leste has facilitated the renewal of ritual practice as an organizing principle of public life, and spurred the emergence of new and distinctly Timorese ways of being modern. Building on their work I set out to show how experience in Oecussi is understood, not through a firm identification with either category, but in the work of 'crossing' between them, with outward-looking (*kase*) lifeworlds animated and made meaningful by ritually mediated engagement with a *meto* realm associated with all that is indigenous, invisible, and upland.

The understanding of *kase* and *meto* as co-present in daily life and decisive in its course, can be traced to resettlement of the rural population in peri-urban settlements that started in the 1970s. Before that time the terms were relatively simple

categorical markers – *kase* folk could be reliably distinguished by wearing trousers, *meto* people always wore village woven *beti* (sarong).<sup>111</sup> Now, even for those who remain in the hills, foreign ways (not to mention trousers) have become common, and the utility of *kase* and *meto* for describing two contrasting and sometimes oppositional modes of being (e.g. *our grandfathers fought the kase*) have been reduced. Urbanization (combined, after independence, with the freedom to return to the hills) has led to a blurring of identities, with the act of navigating the space between them becoming arguably more important than the contrast – less discrete categories than markers of the sort of creative in-between that Jackson (2015) calls a *limitrophe* – a conceptual space in which acknowledging the past is essential to making plans for the future.

While the outward form of daily life in Oecussi may be understood through materialist logics that disregard this experience, as we have seen throughout this study, the perspectives of those who live there cannot. The sick accept pills, but ask the sick why they recover and they will speak of spirits. Public servants enforce national laws but admit, in moments of stress, that they must invoke the authority of their highland clan to give those laws meaning and gravity. Before school exams, ritual speakers beseech the ancestors to ‘lift the lid from the betel case’ (*nait naan in aklubi*), removing any intellectual limitations that might prevent the village’s children from securing good results and thus success in the *kase* realm (*pos alekot, sulat alekot*, good posts, good

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<sup>111</sup> Such a distinction was not only made by the Timorese. Colonial accounts draw a distinction between ‘civilised’ natives who wore trousers and ‘uncivilised’ ones who did not (Felgas 1956, 168). See also Donzelli (2012, 148).

letters). Elsewhere in this book, I have discussed the role that that topogenic oral narratives (Chapter 3), ritual speech (Chapter 7) and divination (Chapter 4) play in maintaining these relationships. Here I shift my focus from the material and ritual technologies that sustain this *tradiasaun*, to a case study of a creative and charismatic individual who is central to its (re)production.

The individual at the centre of my case study is a man known to all as Maun (Brother) Dan. A petty criminal who lived on the fringes of Pante Makassar, in 2008 his life was transformed after what he and thousands of his followers believe was an encounter with Saint Peter, Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus on the sacred beach of Lifau, where it is believed Portuguese priests first brought Catholicism to Timor in the 16th century. Tasked by these divine beings to heal the sick and bring a new message of hope, truth, and peace to the world, he organized the acolytes that flocked around him into an association called the *Sagrada Familia*.<sup>112</sup> In 2015, most of my informants in Oecussi believed him to be a genuine miracle worker, and in times of illness or emergency, it was him rather than any sort of trained medical professional that many preferred to call. Recently he has started to expand his influence beyond the enclave, holding a prayer/healing meeting in Dili and (so it is said) curing a policewoman from Baucau of HIV. Drawing on Dan's account of the divine revelation that gave rise to the Sacred Family, and my own observations from

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<sup>112</sup> Confusingly, the *Sagrada Familia* was also the name of a mystical group originally linked to the anti-Indonesian guerrillas around Baucau (Kingsbury 2009, 89). The two groups are not affiliated. Molnar (2014) describes another comparable group, *Kolimau 2000*, which operated around Atsabe in the nation's central highlands.

accompanying him in his work of ‘healing’ and counselling the distressed, this chapter looks at how the organization’s power stems from its ability to reinterpret what is Catholic in line with characteristically Austronesian beliefs and practices, including the use of ‘medicine’ made from ‘sacred’<sup>113</sup> plants, the veneration of certain rocks and the idea that illness or misfortune can be caused by an excess of spiritual ‘heat’. In this way, the Sacred Family represents a new way of being that is defined by its association with the spiritual power of *meto* even as it deliberately sets out to legitimize and enrich itself by engaging with the *kase* world.

Religion in Oecussi: the concept of *le’u*, the coming of the Catholic and the influence of the Indonesian state

Before continuing with my exploration of Brother Dan and his Sacred Family, it is useful to discuss in more detail the socio-spiritual-political-religious context in which it came into being and continues to evolve.<sup>114</sup>

Although almost all professing to be Catholic, the villagers of Oecussi still understand and interact with their universe through practices moderated by the concept of *le’u*, a *Meto*

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<sup>113</sup> The medicine Dan and other healers typically used was made by boiling the bark of a banyan tree (*hau nunuh*) and then evaporating the fluid to create a powder which could be applied as a paste known simply as medicine (*malo*). The clinical efficacy of this substance has never been assessed; however, it is noteworthy its healing properties were described as being not applicable to banyan trees in general; only to specific, sacredly revealed trees. In Dan’s case this tree grew near his ancestral village and had been revealed to him in a dream.

<sup>114</sup> Material from this chapter was adapted for a paper that was published in *Oceania* (see Rose 2017a). Thanks to their anonymous reviewers.

word that connotes a system of animist beliefs and ancestor worship, which encompasses all that is supernatural, ancestral, and ritual.<sup>115</sup> As mentioned earlier the Meto sometimes refer to their religion as *hau le'u*, *faut le'u*, which can be roughly translated as 'sacred tree, sacred stone'. It revolves around ongoing contact with ancestor spirits (*nitu*) who intervene in the world of the living and are consulted through divination rites undertaken at altars consisting of a three-pronged stump and a flat stone (*hau mone*). Ritual observances and everyday conduct are carried out in such a way that the demands of the watchful spirits are met, thus enabling life in the village to continue harmoniously.

Even in remote villages, however, life is changing. In recent years, migration to urban areas, and the spread of communication technologies and education, have brought tempting alternatives to village life. The mountain roads are rugged, plied by trucks laden with dusty sacks of goods from the market and passengers clinging to the sides. Kids run out to meet them, cheering with excitement at the possibility of returning friends, news from town, or the chance of cadging a biscuit or slurp of soft drink. With electricity still far from universally available, in the mountains many sleep by the light of a three-stone hearth (*tunaf*) and wake with the dawn for another day of work in their swidden gardens (*nmoe' lele*). Asked in their own language about the future, older children in these areas do not say they want to become modern; they say they want to become foreign (*au 'loim he poi 'kase*). While there

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<sup>115</sup> Across Timor-Leste, *lulik*, the Tetun equivalent of *le'u*, is used to describe comparable belief systems. For a Timorese written summary of the concept, see Trindade 2011.

is a feeling that, as Appadurai (1996, 9) puts it, ‘modernity is elsewhere’, the dream of accessing it can be as frightening as it is alluring, because with the prospect of liberation from the sameness and sometimes hunger of subsistence farming comes the likelihood of being spoken of as a stranger.

Though present since the arrival of Portuguese monks and traders in the 1500s (Hägerdal 2012), until the Indonesian era when affiliation with a formal religion became compulsory Catholicism in Timor-Leste was mostly restricted to the few urban areas. Kohen (2001, 46) estimates that only 20 per cent of the population of Portuguese Timor was Catholic in 1974. The Church was closely associated with the colonial state, and while baptism seems to have been expected of the small number of Timorese *assimilados* in the towns (Aritonang & Steenbrink 2008, 338), the remote and often roadless interior was only sporadically evangelized. While Church sources in far-off Macau optimistically state that 76 per cent of the population was Catholic by the early 1970s (Teixeira 1974, 482), the extent to which this figure is higher than in other parts of Portuguese Timor, as well as the recollections of older Oecussi residents collected by myself and Meitzner Yoder (2015, 306) who remember their villages as having had little contact with the lowlands where the church was based, suggests this figure may be too high.

For centuries, Christian presence in the highlands of Dutch Timor was also minimal; however, from 1906 a new Dutch policy of direct control started to open the interior to large-scale missionary efforts (Steenbrink 2007, 164). While the Protestant mission in the interior of the island south of Oecussi counted just 500 adherents in 1930, by 1957 there were around 80,000 (Brookes, 265). Catholic missionaries in the same area

also watched their congregation grow from around 2000 in 1901, to 40,000 in 1940 (Steenbrink 2007, 160).

Despite a common language and 24 years of shared government, the religious situation in Oecussi remains distinct, although influenced by that prevailing in Indonesia. While the *uem le'u* and *hau mone* that signify *adat* practice remain ubiquitous in Oecussi, in Indonesian Timor animist practice tends to be less open. There, under development-minded central governments, identification with indigenous belief systems has been considered incompatible with the growth of a prosperous modern state (Davidson & Henley 2007, 10). To this day each Indonesian citizen is required to register as belonging to one of six major world religions. Dan's Sacred Family appear to very much arise from its leader's position at the intersection of these two worlds – educated in Indonesian schools where affiliation with an officially sanctioned religion was mandatory, but still immersed in a society where regardless of what the official line might have been, *adat* was for most a self-evident and indispensable aspect of reality. It is through recourse to this duality, coupled with the pervasive and deeply felt nationalism of present-day Timor-Leste, that Dan's belief that his revelation is a distinctly Timorese contribution to global Catholicism is most easily explained.

### 'Heat', healing, and the meto in Oecussi

During my years in Timor, whenever I stepped off the plane in Darwin airport I was struck by the uncanny sensation that I was entering a world where people lived forever. Good food, safe roads, hygienic buildings, advanced and available medical

care, universal education – in Australia the death of a young person was an unusual tragedy, and the old are frequently in their 90s when they pass away. Landing in such a place just hours out of Oecussi could be jarring. There, women often die in childbirth (WHO 2016<sup>116</sup>) and their infants all too often expire on the *hala'* (platform/cradle) by the hearth, or as infants. Surviving children usually grow up malnourished and underweight. I watched my neighbour suffering from an untreated tumour, and in the highland schoolhouse where I sometimes taught, I often listened to the chilling sound of small boys coughing like old men. Not long before I arrived, one of the students, a twelve-year-old, suddenly dropped dead from what was believed to be the 'bad medicine' (*malo ka naleko fa*) of a witch. I did not photograph a mountain man I once met walking along the road who seemed to have lost his nose to leprosy, but I can still see his image clearly. In Oecussi, potentially fatal illness and injury were rarely out of sight and never out of mind.

I include this reflection on the fearful omnipresence of mortality in my field-site because without it the power of the *meto* in life there today, and by extension the ministry of Maun Dan, is not comprehensible. Spiritual beings (a category which today encompasses not only ancestral *nitu* and elemental *pah tuaf* – land spirits – but also the Christian God and His saints) are widely believed to offer the only real protection from sickness a person can have, and maintaining a good relationship with them is thus essential. Of a variety of methods used to do this, the most common is making

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<sup>116</sup> Timor-Leste's under-five mortality rate is 52.6 out of 1000 live births. By comparison in Australia it is 3.4.



regular offerings of betel and liquor at household shrines (*hau mone*), intended to assure the spirits they have not been forgotten. At times of crisis, when it is thought the spirits have been offended, these are supplemented with more expensive offerings of pork or chicken. Although this engagement with spirits is a routine and necessary part of Meto life, it is not to be undertaken lightly. The spiritual realm is thought to be to be freighted with devastating heat (*maputu*) that can cause madness and death, and thus poses a grave risk to those who attempt to access it without following the correct ritual and social protocols.

The widespread acceptance of the idea that illness is caused by spirits who punish social transgressions by causing people to sicken does not imply the complete rejection of biomedicine. My informants would attend clinics and hospitals, recognizing that the treatments available there could sometimes reduce suffering, although this was usually done in conjunction with a search for the underlying spiritual cause of the illness. Frequently though, people would tell me the doctors they consulted were mystified as to what was causing their problem and could do nothing. This would confirm, in their eyes, that their illness had its origins in the world beyond, and the place to address such a problem was not at the hospital but in the village. The communication gap caused dismay among the district's Cuban medical mission,<sup>117</sup> some of whom expressed their frustration to me at how such patients, when

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<sup>117</sup> Oecussi's hospital hosted a team of around 10 Cuban doctors and nurses who worked directly with patients and mentored less-experienced Timorese staff on their return from training in the Caribbean. Kirk and Erisman (2009) provide a detailed study of the unique example of South-South aid that their presence represents.

not quickly cured, tended to leave hospital without permission and discontinue their medication.<sup>118</sup> Others, in calmer times, conceded that they understood their perspective. While there were simple and effective treatments for many diseases, with less common afflictions or those that were simply difficult to treat, language barriers and limited resources meant there was little doctors could say, let alone do. Unable to offer better hope, who were they to judge those who preferred to trust in what they knew?

Away from the town and its hospital, *meto* ways of managing life and death remained dominant. Once, arriving in the remote *kuan* of Tui Nikis after a long walk, I was startled to find the settlement seemingly abandoned and the fields empty. It was one of the last hilltop hamlets,<sup>119</sup> and I had heard they were planning to relocate down to the road, but so suddenly? Walking through the maze of head-high corn that separated the *ume* (houses), all was silent except for the crowing of roosters and an eerie wailing faintly audible from somewhere behind the sea of windblown corn. It was only when I suddenly emerged into a clearing that it became apparent what had happened. The entire community was gathered on top of a small hillock, shovelling dirt into the grave of a teenage girl who had died the previous day. My pale, lanky presence was quickly noticed, and the villagers stopped to stare at me with a blend of surprise and grief. It was awkward for everyone, but unable to just ignore me, they signalled for me to come over.

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<sup>118</sup> 'I didn't come here to treat animals' one Cuban was heard raging after he saw a mother who had lost her infant just hours earlier smiling and laughing..

<sup>119</sup> See Fox (1988) for more on the effect of roads on *Meto* communities.

I sat with the man I had come to visit, a friend of the family whom the girl had called Tiu (uncle), by her graveside. Kindly dismissing my apologies for intruding as unnecessary ('you didn't know'), he recounted a familiar tale. They had tried taking her to the hospital but, he said, the doctors couldn't find what was making her sick. Besides, she was frightened and uncomfortable there, so eventually they brought her home. As always there were competing theories as to what was behind the illness. He'd heard that people in the next village over were putting blame (*fei sala*) on her supposedly impious father, but in Tui Nikis everyone agreed it had been God calling her<sup>120</sup> back to heaven, and for that there was nothing to be done except pray.

As one might expect given this understanding of health and fortune, places where it is possible to 'open the gate' (*saif eno*) between the visible and invisible realms take many forms in Oecussi. As mentioned above, most houses have *hau mone* near the front door, and in the mountains it is common to see the stone crosses of Catholic graves used for the same purpose, although when shown photos of this, more orthodox Catholic informants in the lowlands condemned this practice as *moon* (ignorant).<sup>121</sup> The *uem le'u* found in all upland hamlets

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<sup>120</sup> Causes of death are rarely contested in Oecussi. Speaking in the presence of the bereaved, people will typically say that the deceased was being called back to God, but privately the person who died (or in the case of children, their parents) is often blamed for having brought the sickness on themselves through their own sinful actions or lack of respect for the ancestors.

<sup>121</sup> This separation may be stronger in Oecussi than other places on the island. Bovensiepen and Delgado (2016) describe how in other places Catholic relics are considered *lulik*.

are particularly powerful points of crossing. Many people, when ill, prefer to travel back to the hills and buy an animal to sacrifice rather than go to hospital where free medical care is available. Perhaps most dangerous and powerful, and thus usually off limits to all but their hereditary masters (*tuan*), are sacred rocky outcrops, forest groves and springs,<sup>122</sup> where contact could be made not just with the familiar spirits of deceased ancestors, but also legendary forebears and even the 'wild' (*fui pah tuaf*). Finally, objects carried by ritual specialists can also facilitate communication with the world beyond. *Ahinet* (wise people) who specialize in finding the causes of illness carry sacred coins<sup>123</sup> (*loit muti*) and rice from their ancestral village, which are believed to facilitate their connection with the domain of the spirits.

Writing on rural Haiti, medical anthropologist Paul Brodwin (1992) notes the tendency of beliefs about health and healing to encompass more than one ontological system. The people of Timor-Leste and their neighbours in eastern Indonesia are no exception, with scholars exploring how Austronesian attitudes to health reflect participation in both new states and old trade networks, as well as the importance of indigenous perspectives that look to complexes of ritual and place as key to addressing cases of illness. Lewis (1989, 491) describes

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<sup>122</sup> The *tuan* (master) of Oel Na'ek (Great Water) near Kutete has taken this metaphor to another level by actually building a small door next to the *hau mone* at the place where ceremonies for contacting the ancestors usually take place. I wanted to photograph it but, unusually, was told that the spiritually charged nature of the area made this impossible.

<sup>123</sup> Usually old Dutch currency from the Netherlands East Indies but including the occasional Mexican silver dollar and coinage from China's Guangzhou province.

the beliefs of the Ata Tana Ai people of Flores who, like the Meto, temper their engagement with biomedicine with an understanding that the root of disease and suffering is an excess of spiritual heat that can be addressed through ritual speech and offerings of food. McWilliam, discussing the Meto themselves, characterizes their practices concerning the health of infants and their mothers as defined by a sense of 'spiritual collectivity' (1994, 70; see also McWilliam 2002a), with bodily and community health contingent upon the ritualized acknowledgement that the ancestors are a continuing and real part of the village's socio-political life. Later he (2008) and Palmer (2015, 42) focused on healing among another Timorese people, the Fataluku, showing how even after the advent of biomedicine they continued to draw on ritual, place, and heat in understanding and addressing their health issues.

The perspectives of those who live in Oecussi today fit with these blended approaches to health and healing. My exploration of the belief and practice of Maun Dan's Sacred Family is intended to provide an insight into the lived experience through which this blending occurs.

### 'Strangeness', Mr. Bean and meto healing in 2015

Although the focus of this study is the specific way in which the people of Oecussi use indigenous ontologies to interact with the outside world, it seems appropriate to note at this point how universal this concern is to the work of anthropology today. While the stuff of globalized modernity – mass media, money, aspirations for an urbanized and sedentary life – are now (arguably) found everywhere, how they are accessed and understood remains contingent on local systems of being.

‘Strangeness has been universalised’ is how Bielsa (2016, 50) puts it in his summary of the literature on the pervasive and sometimes uncanny nature of this encounter, theorizing that as the hold of borders over information and people become weaker, the type of cosmopolitanism that was once a hallmark of ‘an intellectual elite has been generalised’.

From my very first encounter with Brother Dan, this was a conclusion that seemed congruent with my data. His home was on the edge of Oecussi’s single large town in a mosquito-infested *bairro* called Palaban, where the Indonesian-era water distribution system had broken down leaving everyone reliant on polluted wells<sup>124</sup> for keeping clean; instant noodle wrappers floated in puddles of water; coffee tasted brackish despite four spoons of sugar; stick-thin kids played with rusted motorbike parts. Dan, his wife and their children lived in a dirt-floored hut made of *palapa* and roofed with rusty tin that would have been entirely unremarkable except for their old television. When I arrived, he was off playing cards, but his wife said she would call him and ask him to return. Meanwhile I was asked to come in and join the family, who were sitting around on plastic chairs watching a rerun of *Mr. Bean*<sup>125</sup> on an Indonesian TV station, specifically ‘Mr. Bean in Room 426’, where Bean checks into a hotel with a narrow staircase and gets stuck behind an old lady taking it one step at a time. At the centre of

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<sup>124</sup> In both urban and rural areas, lack of access to clean water is a problem throughout Timor-Leste. Pinto (2014) provides more detail.

<sup>125</sup> *Mr. Bean* was a British comedy series of the early 1990s that continues to be widely syndicated throughout the world. It revolves around the slapstick misadventures of its eponymous and mostly mute main character as he tries and generally fails to go about his daily life in London. Japanese cartoons are also very popular.

its comedy are Bean's attempts to get around her by climbing over the banister, from which he almost falls off. Although the socio-political context of English seaside hotels might have been unfamiliar to rural Timorese, they've all seen someone fall out of a coconut palm and, judging by their laughter, the sort of tomfoolery that might cause an Englishman to 'mouf (fall) from a staircase was something they recognized very well.

The reason I mention this detail here is to underline the fact that even before I actually got a chance to speak to him, it was clear that any analysis of Dan's movement would be, in part, an account of global contact; one which described *meto* ritual in the context of both the upland villages where it originated, and the unprecedented new connectivity that it heralded.

It is important to note that this connectivity was not something I had the luxury of approaching as a detached observer. My access to healthcare was far beyond anything most Oecussi residents could dream of, but it was still limited. Participant observation was, in this case, inseparable from corporeal vulnerability. This reality proved as critical to my analysis of life there as my objective observations. While the role of serendipity in participant observation has been the subject of academic inquiry (see, for example, Hazan and Hertzog 2011), it seems remiss not to mention that misfortune can also work wonders. It was, at any rate, only through illness that I wound up meeting Brother Dan.<sup>126</sup>

As noted in the previous chapter, that year in Timor I became

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<sup>126</sup> My actions were inspired in part by Michael Jackson's *From Anxiety to Method – A Reappraisal* (2007, 154–173) in which, developing the themes of Devereux's (1967) classic essay, he describes how he consulted a West African shaman during a difficult period of his own fieldwork.

very ill. Something, I suspect a smear of shit from a person or pig, had got into a cut on my foot where it set off a toxic eruption of pus and poisoned blood that laid me flat and started spreading towards my vital organs. Instead of hanging out in sacred houses or making recordings of corn-weeding songs, I wasted away in a sweaty sick bed, too weak even to fix the holes in my mosquito net, let alone transcribe my notes. All my neighbours tried to help in their way. As discussed in detail in the previous chapter, Avo Marta and her friend the wise man (*ahinet*) Tua Koa conducted a divination ritual (spinning the machete, *benas keo*), which connected my illness to the angry spirit of a long-dead neighbour and suggested the spirit could be assuaged with a shared meal of chicken, palm liquor, and betel nut. Dr. Umberto, the head of the Cuban medical team who I consulted later, took me into his office and said it was serious and I would need injections of powerful antibiotics three times daily for a week, and also, what I was doing in those villages? Didn't I know they had TB and leprosy there?

I did. In fact, it was in one of those villages, Kutete, where the problem had started and a local woman known for her affinity for healing through prayer and homemade medicine had tried pasting the skin around the wound with a salve made of banyan leaves. I met with Maun Dan last. He was the best-known healer of all, the most trusted, and everyone (except for Dr. Umberto) seemed to think highly of him. While others could divine the disposition of spirits or dispense medicines mixed up in some Indonesian industrial estate, they were not necessarily people set apart by God. Some skills could be learned, and others (such as divination) could be developed by those with the ability, but what Dan offered was on another



level. He was, it was believed, select of God, and he had personally met Jesus. His power to heal and cast out spirits was unambiguously described as *milagre* – miraculous.

Given Dan's reputation as a mystic, I had expected there would be something more ceremonious about his healing practice, or at least that it would take place in a more 'ceremonial' seeming location. Dan did in fact have a prayer room built on to the side of his house, a candlelit shed where the walls were pasted with illustrations of Jesus he had printed out at the office, but that wasn't where he addressed my infection. Instead, he appeared in the doorway and, after a quick introduction and a few cursory questions about what had happened to my foot, got down on one knee to minister to it right in front of the television. As Mr. Bean continued his battle with the staircase, Dan placed his right hand perhaps a centimetre away from the severely infected open wound.

'*Keta kona!*' (T: don't touch it) I shouted. But he just smiled and looked up at me.

'Is it cooler?' he asked.

Later he explained that illness was caused by 'heat' (T: *manas*) brought on either by improper engagement with the spiritual realm or sin. As both a sinner and someone who was spending a lot of time asking people about *adat*, both were possibilities. Since his encounter with divine beings on the beach at Lifau, Dan had had the ability to 'pull' this heat away and thus (sometimes) reduce the severity of illnesses or even effect a cure. He said that usually it took 10 minutes or so, and that he did this all the time. His kids seemed absorbed by Mr. Bean and barely noticed. His wife, cradling their baby, smiled slightly but said nothing. They had seen this before.

'Now'? asked Dan hopefully. 'Can you feel it?'

I was still hobbling when I left half an hour later. And although Dan seemed a little disappointed that I wasn't completely cured, he seemed happier when I told him that perhaps it would feel better tomorrow. He invited me to come back in a week so he could assess the progress of my recovery and tell me more about how the Sacred Family and its mission of healing had come into being.

### The book of Dan. The door in the tree

Like self-made preachers the world over, Dan likes to tell the tale of his redemption. Born in the remote hamlet of Bi Tunis in Suko Taiboko<sup>127</sup> shortly before the end of Portuguese rule, Dan spent the Indonesian years living with relatives on the edge of the rapidly growing town of Pante Makassar where he attended school. Always a rebellious child, he became mixed up with a gang of *preman* (I: thugs) who, though mostly known for hanging around the dusty market drinking and playing cards, were also associated with the local clandestine resistance (T: *frente klandistina*). In some ways, they made for unlikely independence activists; as well as Meto and Tetun they spoke

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<sup>127</sup> Bi Tunis is notable for being the probable site of the only fighting to occur in Oecussi during the Second World War, the destruction of an Australian reconnaissance patrol by Japanese soldiers. Although this incident is remembered through a variety of oral legends the core detail – that four Australians were captured/killed after a gun battle near a cave – are consistent with the Australian Government's record of a disastrous July 1945 operation: Sunable (National Archives of Australia: A3269, V17, 126–132. See also Chamberlain, 2010, 33) in which four Australian soldiers were parachuted into Oecussi to obtain information on what was happening in the enclave only to be quickly captured after their leader was killed in an ambush.

the same vernacular of Bahasa Indonesia that could be heard in any dusty market in the archipelago's impoverished east. But at night they served as *estafeta* (T: messengers) for the clandestine resistance, in particular keeping watch for them when unarmed Falintil cadres visited from the east.<sup>128</sup> After independence Dan's involvement in these activities qualified him for a veteran's allowance, although it wasn't much, and by 2008 he was losing most of it gambling. Once, he said, he left his infant alone when he went to play cards.

'In the past I was poor,' Dan told me. 'And usually someone like me cannot become like this [a holy man]. I was a thief, a brawler, a drunk, until one day a message (T: *liafuan*) appeared from heaven and said, "You stop doing these bad things [because] today I am sending my friend [you] into the world".'

After my initial consultation with Dan, the foot had become even worse and I ended up in Oecussi hospital for two days, followed by a painful regimen of thrice daily injections. Later I would seek the assistance of an *ahinet* (wise man) to make sure the illness didn't recur, but after a week off the intravenous drip I was able to hobble and ride a motor scooter. The day I came back to speak to him about the Sacred Family, Dan had turned off the TV, chased away the now well-looked-after children and was waiting with two cups of coffee and an exercise book in which he had handwritten his story.

Given that in Oecussi the written word is still associated with

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<sup>128</sup> While the details of the clandestine resistance in Oecussi remain unwritten Leach (2012), provides an excellent description of the movement across the country.

the power of the Church and the State,<sup>129</sup> this is significant. In West Timor, the telling of stories (especially foundational ones) can be a fraught business, and is rarely the work of individuals. McWilliam<sup>130</sup> has noted how among the Meto, spoken tales of past times are the basis on which claims to land and precedence are made within the village, a situation that continues in Oecussi today. Speaking out of turn or making even inadvertent errors in the telling of these stories can thus potentially provoke not just the wrath of detail-minded spirits, but also upset the political status quo by inflaming disputes over land and status.

In Meto villages, sacred knowledge has always been controlled collectively, and this is why, although it was a page in a cheap scrapbook of a type available at any *kios*, the medium of Dan's tale was significant. Its existence is an example of how *meto* knowledge and spiritual authority, which had been rooted in the collective life of the highland village, is becoming, through the use of *kase* technology, the basis for personal ambition and extra-village identity in a way that it couldn't before.

Dan had taken the book out especially for the occasion from the prayer room where it was kept on the same table as his bible and sacred rocks. In some ways, it seemed to be a sacred object much like the other sacred objects there, a prop through which authorized people could safely speak about the spiritual realm. Clearly the fact that it could be read was part of its power, but when it came time to tell me his story Dan put it back

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<sup>129</sup> See Kaplan and Baldauf (2011, 112).

<sup>130</sup> Probably the best example of this is that recounted in McWilliam's account of the telling of 'The Gate and the Path of Nubuasa' (2002).

down by the pitcher of coffee and spoke to me directly. It was when things were near their worst, he told me, that everything changed. It was 2008, and there was a grotto near his house where he would sometimes go to pray. Grottos (*gruta*), small rocky gardens with sacred statues where people go to light candles and ask for help, are common on the edge of villages throughout Timor-Leste. Who had built this one and when he wasn't sure. Probably it was someone who fled in 1999 and never came back. Now it was abandoned and overgrown. The place where there should have been a statue of Mary was empty. Dan wasn't very religious then, certainly not enough to consider trying to fix up the place or buy a new statue, but he felt badly about how he was treating his family, and in desperation took to asking Saint Peter<sup>131</sup> to show him the way. One day when he was praying there was a downpour, and to his amazement he didn't become wet. He began to notice that in fact this particular grotto never became wet when it rained. Someone, or something, was protecting it. Like most Oecussi hamlets the place where he was raised was one where life was lived in the open and in keeping with the cycles of the sun and clouds rather than the clock. Dan was sensitive to anything out of joint in the natural world. He knew something was going on and suspected that, somehow, his prayers were being answered.

A few nights later he found out how. Waking up, he was startled to realize he was not in his house with his wife and children, but kilometres away on the beach of Lifau. Lifau is famous throughout Timor-Leste as the *rai santo* (holy land)

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<sup>131</sup> Dan reasoned Saint Peter was a good saint as he controlled the gates to heaven.

where Portuguese Dominican missionaries built their first fortress/mission on Timor and, it is believed, Catholicism came to the island. From a Timorese standpoint, there could be no more fitting place for a new revelation.

Dan said:

*I was startled to find myself there. Before, I had been sleeping at home. St. Peter laid me down at in a cave at the base of a tamarind tree there. [I woke up] and saw St. Peter standing there holding a horse.*

*St. Peter said to me, 'Open the door over there.' I opened the door [in the tree] and there was a white woman (T: malae feto ida), a white man and a white baby.*

*St. Peter asked me, 'Sir, you have been chosen to carry the truth' (T: ita boot agora hili atu lori ida ne'ebe lo'os). I picked up the infant Lord Jesus Christ, I picked him up to carry him away and got on the horse. Before I had gone too far though Jesus Christ began to cry, cried because he wanted to return home to his mother and father.*

*St. Peter and I asked each other 'what's this? [We'll have to] go back.' Back at the tree we were about to get off the horse when St. Peter asked, 'can you take the woman with you as well?'*

*I replied, 'Yes, but I would prefer to just take all of them.'*

Dan explicitly identifies his message as Catholic, but as has been noted elsewhere in this book, rocks, trees, caves, dreams, and sacred land are at the centre of Timorese *adat*. While Johnson (2015) has noted the striking coexistence of *meto* and Catholic ritual in Oecussi, her work suggests they are parallel but separate parts of a whole rather than as classically syncretic. During my time in the field I found the layout of *uem le'u* (sacred houses) to provide a clear example of this. These round structures are built around a central pole (*nii*), referred

to in ritual speech as the navel (*usan*) of the family. From this pole hangs a sword,<sup>132</sup> bags of ritual currency ('*loit noni* and '*loit muti*') received and given as bride wealth, the betel nut purses of deceased relatives, and bags of corn and rice seeds. At its base are rocks taken from the clan's sacred places on which candles are burned. And yet, although the curators of these shrines are usually devout Catholics, crucifixes and images of saints are almost never to be found there, although both are now widely available, even to the very poor. It is clearly important in Oecussi that the two things, though mutually supportive, do not mix in a ritual context.<sup>133</sup>

Fox (1980b) and Brookes (1990) have written of Timorese prophets that claimed contact with divine figures, but it is noteworthy that these movements have tended to focus on repudiating *adat*, sometimes to the point of encouraging people to burn ritual objects and dismantle sacred houses, in order to achieve a more 'pure' Christianity. Such 'spirit movements' were products of their times. They arose in both the Dutch East Indies and Indonesia during an era when the authorities tended to discourage *adat* as associated with a primitive past, and an impediment to the attainment of modernity. Dan's account reflects the distinct break from this political order represented by the advent of an independent state in Timor-

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<sup>132</sup> Previously there was also usually a gun. See Fox (1988) on the ritual and politico-economic importance of old Dutch and Portuguese guns in West Timor. After an Indonesian government campaign to collect them in the mid-1980s, these firearms appear to have completely vanished.

<sup>133</sup> This separation seems to have not been as distinct in other parts of Timor. See, for example, the description provided by Bovensiepen and Delgado Rosa (2016) of the relationship between Catholicism and indigenous religious practice in Timor's central highlands.

Leste. His increasingly influential revelation that the purest and best Catholicism is actually accessed through *meto* (or at least *meto*-influenced) ritual represents an open privileging of *adat* in a way that would have likely been considered seditious or heretical under Indonesian policy, which held that everyone should belong to a religious organization registered with and approved of by the state. Indeed, the great importance informants placed on assuring me that they were in fact respectable Catholics, and that there was no contradiction between going to church and following ‘the rock and the tree’, may represent a lingering influence of that official disapproval. They explained to me that although their ancestors were in heaven, close to the Catholic God, they had been *Meto* people and thus were best contacted through the rituals they were familiar with.

In the next section of this paper I look at the everyday work of the Sacred Family and how it uses photography to make a case for the veracity of its distinctly *meto* revelations in the wider realm of the *kase* world.

### Stones that look like saints

For an academic looking in from the outside, one of the difficulties in considering social forms emergent in travel between *meto* and *kase* is that the two categories are associated with very different systems of perceiving reality. Here I discuss how the Sacred Family, by compiling and displaying photographs of sacred objects (literally, stones that look like saints), has become invested in an attempt to create a bridge between these two perspectives, claiming legitimacy both through association with the *lulik* forces central to many



Timorese experiences, and more universal norms of empirical evidence associated with the prestige and resources of the outside world.

The way Dan concludes his account of his experience on the beach at Lifau underlies the breadth of the gap the Sacred Family is trying to cross.

*I took them all [Mary, Jesus and Joseph], and suddenly I was back home. On visiting the grotto, I discovered that there was five dollars on the altar. Although it hurt me, although my children were hungry, I didn't use this five dollars to buy food but statues, statues of the Sacred Family.*

The statues Dan bought with the money now sit on the altar in Dan's prayer shed for all to see, as 'evidence' of his story's literal truth. Despite this there are many elements in the account that raise questions for those outside the *habitus* of the Timorese village. To me, what Dan had described was indisputably a dream. Yet when I asked if that was the case, he said it was not. His night journey to the beach, his horse ride with St. Peter, the grotto untouched by the rain, these were all things that had literally happened. He said I should understand this – that it was important because 'to see God is no small thing'. And after all, he asked, had he not shown me the very statue he bought with the five-dollar bill that God placed on his altar?

Writing on Sierra Leone's Kuranko, Jackson (2013a, 48) also grapples with how to approach ways of knowing and telling that are premised on highly localized experiences of land and spirituality. Cautioning against the temptation to assume that Western perspectives are more aligned with 'reality' than others, he posits we might productively seek a common ground between empirical reasoning and older

ways of sense-making, including divination, ecstatic visions, and other forms of 'magic', as 'systems that introduce a semblance of order into an uncertain universe'. The critical thing, he argues, is to understand how such systems allow us to 'grasp experiences that confound us, react to events that overwhelm us and become creators rather than mere creatures of circumstance'. It is not, he says, necessary to be concerned with the literal truth of such claims, only to seek an understanding of how such systems work.

Jackson's reasoning is a useful resource, and especially when combined with an appreciation of Oecussi's historical and political background, a fit tool for understanding the sort of global connection represented by the Sacred Family, and indeed many of the other social forms discussed in this book that bridge *meto* and *kase* perspectives. Beyond the world of interested academics and in common with encounters between colonial and postcolonial people worldwide, the reality is that up to the present day most outsiders who have visited or ruled the island have taken a sceptical view or have been oblivious to *Meto* religious practice. At least until 1999 the regimes that ruled over Timor-Leste consistently saw *adat* as 'primitive' superstition, rarely deserving official recognition or understanding. Although the rhetoric has since shifted,<sup>134</sup> development practitioners and politicians are still known to describe it as an obstacle to development.

In Oecussi, since the end of colonial times, two things have shifted. One is that the people who constitute the state are

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<sup>134</sup> Indeed, in Timor-Leste the importance of *adat* has received recognition in the new national constitution, albeit more gestural than a serious basis for action or law (Niner, 2017, 93).

now primarily Timorese with their roots in the hills and are usually not estranged from its spiritually contingent *habitus*. The other is that most *Meto* in Pante Makassar, including Dan, have begun to couch their ambitions for the future in terms of success in the outside world. Dan often told me of how he longed for his *meto* revelations to one day be accepted as relevant and important by foreigners. One day, he said, he would open an office in Rome. He spoke darkly of a local parish priest who had not understood this and written him off as mad (T: *bulak*) if not heretical. He sees his lack of foreign language skills, rather than the nature of the belief system he promotes, as one of his main barriers to finding a following in the outside world.

'If I knew English,' he said wistfully, 'perhaps I'd be in Australia.' Later he told me that he did in fact have followers in Australia, although he was unable to explain who they were or where they lived.

The way in which the Sacred Family positions itself with regards to the outside world is key to understanding the appeal it has for many in Oecussi. Its belief system, although compelling because of its integration of *meto* narrative and cosmological elements is bolstered by the credibility lent by their identification with more widely accepted systems of reasoning associated with the world of written words and empirical evidence.

This use of stones that look like saints as protective talismans echoes a universal belief across Timor that certain rocks known as *biru* can provide protection from any sort of physical or spiritual hazard (Castro, 2011, 9), including bullets. Although previously it was taken for granted that it was not necessary or even possible for outsiders to understand such

objects, this is beginning to change as it becomes necessary for people or groups that wish to be taken seriously beyond the mountain village to associate themselves with the power of the *kase* world. The way in which the Sacred Family has curated their collection of sacred rocks – compiling them in a way that they can be used to make a case for the universal relevance of Dan’s meto revelations – provides an example of this.



*An image of a rock said by Dan to be bear the likeness of the Virgin Mary*

As I sat in Dan's backyard looking at photographs of the sacred stones on his computer, he explained why I should take them seriously.

*[God] is everything including Oecussi's traditional culture, this explains why we find God in the rocks, in the past heaven and*

*earth were joined together.*<sup>135</sup>

*Because of this we know that sometimes God appears in rocks. Everyone says, 'Oh that rock over there, just throw it away,' but no, try picking it up and taking a look. Is he [God] here or not? [How can we deny that God is here] If his word ('lia', used here in a very general sense) is in the land? There are many rocks like this.*

*If a rock is the devil's just leave it, but if it's God's carry it with you, for He is inside it so you can pick it up and use it to pray. Truly, God comes down and appears in specific places, in various places.*

Despite Dan's hopes that his revelations will be recognized as significant to mainstream Catholicism, this has yet to occur. This is not to say, however, that his movement is in any way isolated or perceived as illegitimate within Timor-Leste. Indeed, it appears to be growing. In the final section of this chapter I look at how the Sacred Family's message has come to be relevant to the life of spirit and body in the new state to which it and most of its followers pledge allegiance.

## Healing and the Sacred Family

Spending time with Dan the extent to which he is in demand quickly became clear. He seems to juggle at least three different phones, all of which ring frequently with people in various sorts of distress. He listens sympathetically to everyone and promises to visit them when he can. People arrive at his house at all hours seeking prayers, money, healing, and comfort.

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<sup>135</sup> Original Tetun: *buat hotu, hotu fo hotu, kultura Oecussi ni-nian fo hotu, explica kona ba Maromak nia fatin iha fatuk mos explika hotu, dehan uluk lalehan ho rai taka metin.*

Dan doesn't work alone. He has around ten or so acolytes, many of whom got to know him through his day job as a clerk in the municipal office. Through their association with him these followers are thought to have some healing powers, although more often than trying to cure people themselves they act as his agents, ferrying him by motorbike to houses stricken by sickness or other sorts of crises. Dan is popular in the hills as well as on the coast, and he spends many of his weekends travelling to remote villages to answer the calls of those in need. When he is unable to come, they have even been known to call him and hold the handset up to the afflicted – Dan's ability to 'pull heat' is thought to be effective even from the other end of the telephone line.

While Dan's stated intention to meet the Pope and open an office in Rome might be judged as demonstrating a lack of clear understanding about the ways of the outside world, within the socio-political sphere of Timor-Leste his organization has managed to thrive and be taken seriously by most members of the community. In 2015, the legend of his ability to heal had spread to Dili and he travelled there to hold a prayer meeting for the many in the capital who wanted him to minister to their woes. The notes taken by one of his acolytes at this meeting gives a sense of the problems with which people come to him:

*Kristiana Seran: Asks for help from God and Brother Dan because she is sick with worry about her daughter who is not doing well at school.*

*Madelina Fontes Gusmao asks for help from God and Brother Dan because she is very worried and also has a sore leg.*

*Odelia Soares asks for help from God and Brother Dan because people are causing [through magic] her health to decline.*

*Agustinho Jose de Deus asks for help from God and Brother Dan*

*because he is always weighed down with worry and quick to anger at his family.*

*Lucia Flavia Expositu asks for help because she is worried about family responsibilities and about succeeding at school.*

An incident where I was able to accompany Dan in his healing work provided further material for understanding how the Sacred Family conducts its curative practice, and why its services are so valued by those who seek them. Late one afternoon as we were drinking coffee in his backyard, Dan received a phone call from the family of a woman who had lost the use of her arms and legs. She was a primary school teacher who had earlier in the day had a terrible fight with her brother and, that evening, found herself paralyzed. We jumped on his dilapidated motorbike and went to assist.

When we arrived, the woman was prostrate on a sleeping platform in the main room of the house. Members of her family and concerned neighbours had been there for hours, sometimes holding her hand and wiping her forehead with a wet cloth. Her young son sat patiently by her side and a neighbour tried to feed her soup, but she weakly turned her lips away. To me she seemed very sick in a way that suggested some type of neural disruption, possibly a stroke, yet we were welcomed into the house like guests rather than people called to a medical emergency and invited to sit down at a plastic table laden with biscuits and cups of coffee. It was clear from the start that the people of the house understood that this was illness caused by a socio-spiritual problem rather than a blood clot.

Although I had resolved not to offer advice, knowing that with every minute ticking by the woman's chance of recovering could be slipping away, I couldn't stop myself from



speaking up.

'She might be having a stroke, Dan. She has to go to hospital quickly.'

*Parese* (perhaps) he said absently, not meeting my eyes and reaching for his cup of coffee rather than his motorbike keys or telephone. The family of the stricken woman were not uneducated people. They were familiar with the hospital, and their reasoning on why not to take her there was clear. The problem had spiritual rather than physical roots and needed to be treated as such. Compounding this reluctance to seek medical care was the reputation of the hospital; stories abounded of people who had been admitted there with a relatively minor illness only to die days later. By contrast Maun Dan was known to them and trusted not to cause further harm.

Dan quickly identified exactly what had happened. Earlier that day the woman had gone to her home village in the highlands to visit her brother and his family. Their father had died years before and the two had been quarrelling over possession of his *uem kase*<sup>136</sup> ever since. That afternoon before she left, the argument had flared up to the point where they ended up cursing at each other (T: *tolok malu*) in front of the sacred house (*uem le'u*), an act considered gravely offensive to the ancestors known to be present there.

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<sup>136</sup> In keeping with the distinction between *kase* and *meto* discussed earlier, houses in Oecussi are divided into two types. *Uem kase* are square Indonesian-style homes made of concrete, tin and palapa. *Uem meto* are distinctive-looking round houses that predated the arrival and outside construction materials and techniques.



*Dan (on the left) with the stricken school teacher and her family*

Dan actually tutted and drew in his breath disapprovingly before finally getting up and walking over to the patient (see photo). She couldn't speak above a whisper and he leaned in to listen as she recounted her version of the story. As she spoke he took one of her hands, later telling me that he was assessing her temperature, noting that as a result of her unsettled thoughts and emotions drawing an excess of blood to her brain, her fingers were cold to the touch. He stepped back and took out his mobile phone.

In the aftermath of their row, the woman's brother had not been taking her calls, but almost no one in Oecussi was going to refuse to speak to Maun Dan. He calmly explained how the discord had upset their ancestors, who were distressed to see their descendants fighting over property that should have been shared harmoniously. He said he could tell the spirit that

they hadn't meant any harm, but unless he promised to travel down to Pante Makassar and iron things out with his sister, he could not guarantee that things weren't going to get worse. His sister could die. She might never walk again. Later, he said, to show contrition and confirm that their apologies had been accepted, they must arrange to slaughter a pig at the sacred house and examine the liver (*tail lilo*).

By the time we left her sickbed, a reconciliation between the teacher and her brother had been brokered, and she was feebly sitting up being spoon-fed broth. Although she remained frail and housebound for days afterwards, after a week had passed she had recovered enough to return to the classroom.

Discussing this incident afterwards, Dan explained to me that it was nothing out of the ordinary, and to make his point he showed me the collection of before and after photos the Sacred Family had compiled of their earlier healing work. He had one of a seemingly starving baby who they said had been afflicted by spirits angry at discord within its family, and another one of the same child smiling and almost chubby after the spiritual crisis had been resolved. There was a photo of a sad and emaciated woman said to have HIV, and a much happier looking one after she had been freed from it. There was no after photo of the kid who had fallen out of a coconut tree and ended up with a paralyzed and seemingly gangrenous leg, but I was assured he was well on the way to recovery.

That for much of the Timorese population the cause of physical illness and misfortune is often believed to be the result of spiritual retribution for transgressive behaviour is both apparent to anyone who has spent time on the island and

well documented in the literature.<sup>137</sup> What this description of the Sacred Family adds to this is an insight into how this understanding is changing in the context of independence and urbanization.

Colonial and missionary sources frequently spoke dismissively about ‘native beliefs’,<sup>138</sup> and though usually well intended, to this day development workers struggle with the reality that many *meto* perspectives do not align with their ideas of how life should be lived. Especially in a postcolonial context like Timor, the word ‘belief’ is a problematic one as it implies a degree of choice, the possibility that there are other, potentially more valid beliefs. Mindful of this, what we might take away from the above description of the Sacred Family’s healing practice is the notion that the contemporary forms of social organization emerging from the redeployment of originally highland perspectives in the lowlands might be more accurately characterized as reflecting not *meto* belief, but *meto* experience. For those seeking salvation at Dan’s prayer meeting in Dili or the family of the sick schoolteacher, the idea that their woes are caused by spirits is not one contestable interpretation among others, but something akin to what a Westerner might describe as ‘common sense’, the only possible way of understanding a plainly observable and deeply felt reality. Both the *meto* experience of spiritual agency as definitive in matters of life and health and the need to access the material and social resources of the *kase* world

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<sup>137</sup> See Hawkins (2011, 222); Roger and Steel (2016); and Nixon (2012, p167–168).

<sup>138</sup> For a particularly lurid but not untypical example of the prevailing attitude at the time, see Duarte (1930) *Timor: Antecâmara do Inferno* (Timor: Antechamber of Hell).

are imperatives. It is through its success in addressing this contradiction that the popularity of the Sacred Family in Oecussi today can be understood.

## Conclusion

The problems that prompted people to attend Dan's meeting in Dili or call him on the phone are reflective of the struggles that Timor-Leste faces as a nation. Health and education outcomes remain among the lowest in Asia. Secure waged employment is impossible to come by for many. Even as the rains seem to be becoming more unreliable (Oxfam Australia, n.d.) and as the population grows, most continue to eke out a living from 'low productivity agriculture'. One of the best-known books about the country is *East Timor Out of the Ashes* (Fox and Babo-Soares, 2000) and the literature on the topic, both popular and academic, rarely neglects to observe that on gaining independence, a new nation was being constructed from the ground up. Usually for the best of reasons, national and international NGOs answered the call to 'rebuild', with 271 operating in Dili in 2002 (Butler, 2011). For a decade after independence it remained the world's largest per capita recipient of foreign aid (Horta, 2013). Especially when considered in light of a discussion about the Sacred Family, what is striking about this situation is that although people in Timor are struggling with problems that are at least to some extent visible to and quantifiable by the outside world, they are very often not engaged with the solutions being offered by outsiders. While hundreds of painstakingly written and expensive reports (most often in English, and thus accessible to only a tiny fraction of the population) have been written

over the years explaining the causes of poverty in Timor-Leste and discussing how they might be addressed, these rarely take time to seriously acknowledge that for much of the population the causes of these issues are lodged not in the material realm, but in the invisible world of spirits. To put it another way, seen from a development perspective or through the metrics visible to those trying to construct a modern nation state, Timor-Leste is defined by what it lacks (or in some cases, what it is perceived to have lost). It is 'undeveloped' or 'war-torn' (Castillo, 2008, 9). At least in Oecussi, most Timorese see things differently. For them it is the land's spiritual abundance (something ordinarily invisible to outsiders) rather than material lack that is important in understanding and addressing life's problems.

Maun Dan's Sacred Family shows how the part played by this gap in the production of new social forms is a complex one. In Oecussi today, issues of health and personal fortune do seem to be largely understood through *meto* perspectives. Even among the more educated segment of the population, alternative scientific perspectives for why things happen tend to remain secondary in practice because spiritual agency remains a matter of felt experience rather than reasoned belief. The result of this is that among the urbanized, lowland population who identify as *kase*, there remains a demand for *meto* spiritual intermediaries who draw on traditions that trace their origins to the highland villages in which everyone once lived. As doctors and development workers express their frustration at the seeming inability to get Timorese to help themselves, Maun Dan's phone won't cease ringing with people trying to do exactly that, albeit in a way that makes sense to them.

In envisaging how this works it is key to be mindful of the

recently postcolonial (and arguably neo-colonial) context in which this is taking place. While it is true that the end of Portuguese and Indonesian rule has allowed the practice of *adat* to assume a place in public life that would have previously been impossible, the profound and global structural inequalities left behind by colonialism remain. Just as there were once tangible material and political rewards to be reaped by becoming an *assimilado* in the service of the Portuguese empire, or rising through the ranks of the Indonesian public service, today fluency in and identification with ways of sense-making that are comprehensible to and valued by the outside world have become prestigious and potentially lucrative.

The Sacred Family's suite of practices and beliefs clearly reflect this dynamic, taking the *meto* perspectives central to the experience of most in Oecussi and rendering them credible in a lowland setting by associating them with devotional Catholicism and technologies, such as writing, long associated with the wealth and power of the *kase* world. Rather being *kase* or *meto*, then, the system of beliefs behind the Sacred Family revolve around enabling ritually mediated processes of shifting between them and drawing from both, an organization empowered by the creative and often repeated act of crossing rather than a permanent identification with any outwardly defined way of being.

In this chapter I have shown how for many in Oecussi, seeking help from the spiritual/hidden realm through the Sacred Family remains the most effective and appropriate recourse

in times of crisis.<sup>139</sup> Despite the questionable effectiveness of such treatments in many cases, it should also be noted that the sense of control people are able to maintain over their own lives by using them is a quantifiable good that would be lost were they forced to engage with clinical healing in its unadulterated form. In this way, although the Sacred Family as it exists can and perhaps should be faulted for discouraging people from seeking the much-needed intervention of clinical medicine, taking a broader view it might also be seen as an exemplar of a process through which the resettled highlanders of present-day Oecussi are seeking to reconcile the *kase* and the *meto*, to engage with the world on their own terms. In the Sacred Family, I argue we can see a still-evolving model through which the people of Oecussi are moving to understand and integrate the advantages of the outside world into their lives in a way that is meaningful to them and provides a

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<sup>139</sup> Opinions varied over whether it is appropriate to seek intervention from both Dan and medical professions. The most common pattern was for people to seek the help of Dan or an *ahinet* first, and if that didn't work eventually make their way to a hospital or clinic. Unfortunately, this often resulted in people receiving medical attention only when it was too late to be effective, further reducing the confidence of the population in the healing ability of doctors.



## 6

### Chapter 6: Meto kingship and environmental governance

My original idea for this chapter, a case study exploring how Oecussi's pre-state political system both enables and complicates the authority of its present-day government, occurred to me during a long dry-season walk from Kutete to the coastal road. The enclave's large forests are nearly gone now, felled for fuel, or to make way for swidden gardens, but in the latter half of 2014, walking through a remnant stand of trees, I was excited to spot one of Oecussi's few surviving marsupials quickly vanishing up a *hau kiu* (tamarind tree).

'*Meda!*' (possum) I said to my travelling companion.

'*Sisi*' (meat) he replied, and promptly started climbing after it.<sup>140</sup>

Whereas I saw a possum, and thought of the threatened ecosystem of dry-land forests in the Lesser Sunda Islands, the result of having grown up in a place where 'the environment' was something to be studied, preserved, and maybe visited

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<sup>140</sup> Readers will be pleased to read that this was a particularly agile possum that escaped to live another day.

on school holidays, my friend was understandably more interested in it as a potential source of protein. On the road at the bottom of the hill, the local environmental office had placed a billboard announcing we were in a wildlife preserve, and asking people to protect wild animals for the generations for come (T: *protega ita nia animal fuik ba gerasaun ikus mai*), but we were coming down from a village where the 'foi nsae (youngsters, literally those just come up) were stunted from a lack of healthy food in general and protein in particular, and it was clear to see why the message hadn't caught on. Later, Dr. Dan Murphy of the Bairo Pite Clinic, first stop for distressed mountain folk coming to Dili, would express the issue more starkly. In late 2015, across the island the rains failed, and in some areas people started to starve.<sup>141</sup> 'We are', he said simply, 'being flooded with malnourished children' (Murphy, Facebook Post, 2015).<sup>142</sup>

My concern here is with sketching the modes of being and governance that are emerging as these two seemingly distinct ways of understanding environment and authority rub up against each other in the hills of Oecussi. Eager to reap the benefits of being a fully accepted sovereign nation, and influenced by foreign advisers with a typically minimal knowledge of local context, the laws and institutional mechanisms promulgated by Dili tend to aspire to internationally accepted norms of

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<sup>141</sup> After an alarmingly late start, in the first months of 2016 Oecussi received enough rain that farmers were able to plant their crops. The south coast wasn't so lucky and suffered a partial harvest failure and severe food stress (Republika Demokratica de Timor-Leste, Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, n.d.).

<sup>142</sup> Material for this chapter has been adapted into a paper for *Oceania* (see Rose, forthcoming).

good governance and environmental protection. In theory, in Timor, rare animals are off limits to hunters, and the officials who protect them are impartial servants of the state. What becomes apparent on looking closer, however, is that such regulations are at odds with reality as most live it. In the hills of Oecussi, deeply felt, pre-state ways of thinking and living (wild animals are a source of food, and the only person who might have the authority to restrict their hunting is the *naijuuf* or his *tobe*) are what matter. In this chapter I follow the story of a state employee tasked with extending the government's authority into Oecussi's remote Suko Ben Uf, as he partially resolves this tension by pragmatically engaging with *meto* ways even as he argues for their lack of relevance in the modern world.

Considering the extension of centralized authority and state-mediated exchange into a remote area of Sulawesi, Murray Li (2014, 181) questions the degree to which previously isolated highland communities such as the *Meto* are able to 'sustain relations of care and be protected by their social institutions' in the face of expanding lowland regimes and markets. My focus on how the implementation of state law in Oecussi appears to be at least partially contingent on a substantial (although, significantly, unacknowledged) accommodation with *meto* perspectives is a way of approaching this problem. Like Murray Li, at the beginning of my fieldwork, I suspected that the frameworks of mutual support embedded in *Meto* custom might be 'not sufficient to prevent the emergence of inequalities' after contact with an aggressive and sometimes unsympathetic outside world. And indeed, while the highland clans of Oecussi had always exhibited a high degree of socio-political stratification, from 2011 to 2015 I came to see how a

population previously marked by a relatively even distribution of wealth had become divided between those who had access to money and those who still made their living directly from the land. Families who had relocated to the small urban area, and succeeded in securing waged employment, were able to achieve a degree of material security unimaginable to their rural kin. However, while it is often assumed that ‘traditional’ ways of life, inclusive of Li’s ‘relations of care’, are weakened by states and markets, in Oecussi it was apparent that things were more complex. There, arrangements of power and patronage traceable to the once semi-independent highland *suko* had shifted to the town, only to be reproduced, transformed, and in many ways strengthened by their incorporation into globalized networks of power, money, and knowledge.

In this chapter I show how, although anti-hunting laws in Oecussi come from the central government, the nature of their (partial) enforcement is determined by their deployment in an environment where pre-state understandings of authority remain strong – a form of governance that, due to its composite nature, we might usefully think about through the metaphor of Tsing’s ‘friction’. As Tsing puts it, although environmental regulations might ‘aspire’ to be universal (2005, 7), deployed by individuals whose derive their authority from pre-state systems of authority, they are clearly not. Seen in this way, the degree and shape of Oecussi’s present-day material and political inequality is an issue of conjuncture rather than intrusion, with state laws intended to regulate the use of natural resources ultimately working to amplify power differentials already present within its socio-political makeup.

Forests, failed states, and the local as a way of getting by

The continuing significance of indigenous political hierarchies, ritual practices, and spiritual beliefs (collectively glossed using the Indonesian loanword, *adat*) to contemporary law and governance in Timor-Leste is well documented in the literature (see, for example, Scheeringa 2007, Denby 2010, and Nixon 2012). While *adat* had its origins in a time when Timorese villages were relatively isolated, it has continued to be a resilient and adaptable way of organizing sociality and controlling access to resources into the globalized present. Writing about the Fataluku of the island's east, McWilliam (2011) has explored this in detail, showing how a renewal of customary political systems and ritual economies allowed residents to maintain social cohesion and sustain themselves after the virtual collapse of state services in 1999. His work is part of a body of scholarship pioneered by Fox's (1980a) volume *The Flow of Life*, and later built upon by McWilliam and Traube in *Land and Life in Timor-Leste* (2011), which explores how Austronesian cognitive schemata and livelihood strategies often blur the sacred/secular oppositions underlying mainstream Western perspectives. This trait has tended to facilitate the growth of socio-political institutions whose visible elements are lent meaning and gravitas by an invisible but indispensable reservoir of spiritual power.

For the democratically elected leaders of Timor-Leste, engagement with this reality has been a matter of utility, as well as an acknowledgement of the instinct that many of their people have to understand reality through this dualistic lens. Finding their early vision of fast and transformative social change stymied by the realities of building a new

state from the ruins of a neglected *provincia ultramarina* and a devastated *provinsi*, it quickly became apparent that achieving the development milestones expected of an aspiring member of ASEAN would not be possible without recourse to pre-state hierarchies and understandings of reality. Since independence in 2002, an extensive literature has developed focusing on how internationally sponsored policy initiatives in agro/forestry (McWilliam, 2001) health and land management (Batterbury, S, et al. 2015) have deployed *adat* to engage with the population; an effort marked by episodes of both success and tension as international standards assumed to be universal are deployed in areas where they are not necessarily congruent with local realities and preferences.

Here I suggest that almost fifteen years after independence, the case can be made that the distinction between *adat* and the practice of the 'modern' state in Timor-Leste is no longer as clear as it once was. Scott's (2009, 6) thinking on 'state and non-state spaces' is my jumping-off point for this line of inquiry. Oecussi was once an exemplar of what Scott describes as a 'state-repelling' area (6-7). Its people were swidden farmers who lived in inaccessible mountain hamlets (*kuan*), and most years grew just enough to eat. Although most of them have since been resettled in larger roadside villages (part of an Indonesian government strategy to bring scattered communities under central control and provide better services), on visiting Tui Nikis, one of the few remaining hilltop *kuan*, residents told me explicitly that their remoteness was part of a deliberate strategy to avoid

unwelcome outside interference.<sup>143</sup> It was a strategy that seems to have usually been successful. While taxes were levied on Oecussi's villages in the form of *corvée* labour<sup>144</sup> and ritualized tribute to a lowland king, these were extracted only in small amounts and often through much effort. Throughout these years, lowlanders, consisting of a small number of Portuguese officials, soldiers, and clergy supported by a handful of mestizo clans, were absolutely distinct from the mountain-dwelling population they thought of as subjects. Highlanders, for their part, rarely had cause to take heed of the authorities on the coast. Meitzner Yoder's observation that the influence of the Church was largely limited to the lowlands until the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Meitzner Yoder, 2015, 305) is congruent with my informants' accounts that before this time direct Portuguese influence stopped at an outpost near the present-day market village of Pasar Tono, beyond which foreigners could only safely continue after securing permission from the appropriate highland clan.

It was Indonesia that, in the two decades after 1975, slowly installed in Oecussi the physical and intellectual infrastructure that is the basis for the way the district is governed today. After their sudden and destructive departure in 1999 and the three-year interregnum of UN rule that followed, those left

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<sup>143</sup> Farram (2004, 75) draws on colonial sources to provide an interesting description of Meto fortifications, noting that like the Indonesians the Dutch also saw making the highland population settle along roads as a means of bringing them under the control of the state.

<sup>144</sup> On hearing how some Portuguese apologists had been known to describe these effectively forced labourers as *voluntariu*, one local, whose father-in-law was old enough to remember the system firsthand, commented to me, 'You're not a volunteer if they're pointing a gun at you.'

responsible for central administration were locals, former *pegawai* (Indonesian public servants) who over decades at school and in the office had been inculcated in the belief that that ‘progress’ was synonymous with the replacement of *adat* with state law. They were also, typically, people who were born in in upland villages for whom *adat* was not a little understood ‘tradition’, but an integral part of their present-day identity. To this day, the outward allegiance of many of these individuals to state-mediated modernity is modified by their profoundly local, spiritually mediated, *meto* sense of self. Living a successful and socially connected life means finding ways to strategically cross between the two.

Compounding this is the reality that the rule of Indonesia in Oecussi, while far more intense than that of Portugal, was still relatively shallow. In spite of the schools, roads, and electricity lines that, throughout the 1980s and 1990s slowly started to appear in the mountains, remote communities remained largely autonomous – with daily life regulated more by the standards of the village rather than the laws of the state. The destruction of 1999, in which much of what the Indonesians had built was destroyed, exacerbated and perhaps prolonged this isolation. During my fieldwork in 2014, the district’s infrastructure, especially in the mountains, had still not been repaired to the level it had attained during these times, and despite the rhetoric of national unity and development coming from the capital, in many places the state was conspicuous mostly through its absence. In such areas, the enforcement of national law (when it occurred at all) tended to be contingent on pre-state frameworks of authority and understandings of life. During my fieldwork in 2014, this dynamic was particularly apparent in the attitude of the local



*Ministerio de Agricultura e Pescas* to laws against the hunting of deer in a remote and ostensibly protected forest area in the district's far west.

The ministry itself did not appear to attach much importance to this work, and indeed it appeared that the only reason the laws were enforced at all was the initiative of an individual public servant with roots in the area where the poaching was taking place. This man, Jose Cunha, was motivated to take action against the deer hunters by a range of factors beyond it being his 'job', including an identification with the forest that seemed sharpened by the sadness of his life in the town, a belief in environmentalism as a global movement, and his background as scion of the princely line that had once acted as the area's guardians and gatekeepers. Asked directly he insisted that the authority of his princely line (*usi'*) had been voided by *democracia*, replaced by his duty to the state and the idea that nature should be preserved for future generations. On getting to know him better and accompanying him on an expedition into the mountains as he attempted to apprehend these poachers, however, it became evident that things were not so simple. In the remainder of this chapter I use Jose and his efforts to protect the forest creatures of his native *suko* as a case study that suggests how we might understand the seemingly haphazard enforcement of environmental laws in Oecussi as being defined not by failure, but by a site of encounter and hybridity within which dictates from Dili are mediated by the need to acknowledge local realities and perspectives.

## Jose and forest: personal ecologies of governance in the 21st century

When Jose Cunha was born, around 1965, his grandfather still ruled over the domain of Ben Uf<sup>145</sup> at the enclave's western edge. To his subjects he was known as Ama (Father) Koa. He had two sons. The elder son was known for his affinity with the Portuguese language and being comfortable around the *kaes muti*' (white foreigners). The younger one (like many Oecussi mountain folk) was more wary of them, although he was good with rituals and agricultural work. When the opportunity to send one of the two to a Portuguese school in Pante Makassar came up during the 1950s, it was clear who should go, and although conventionally the ritual and political duties of *naijuuf* would have passed to the elder brother on the death of his father, in this case it was the other way around. Customary Meto realms were flexible politically, and no one objected to the innovation. In the town, the elder brother took a Portuguese name, Tomas Cunha, and later became a *funsionariu* and point of contact between remote Ben Uf and the outside world. His brother served as *naijuuf* from the highland village of Fatu Bena. Both were referred to by the people of their domain with the honorific, *usi*' (Lord<sup>146</sup>).

Jose divided his childhood between Pante Makassar and

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<sup>145</sup> Ben Uf is a remote suko is on the border with Indonesia on the far western edge of the enclave. During the wet season, it is almost completely cut off from the rest of the enclave. One engineer of my acquaintance who worked there called it 'the Oecussi of Oecussi'.

<sup>146</sup> As alert readers may have noted, the same word is also used to refer to the district's once Portuguese-endorsed king. It is used here in a completely different sense.

Ben Uf. Even in Oecussi, 2015 was an age of mobiles and motor scooters, but when Jose was small the *suko* was a place where outside connection was via a horse track and not even a single telephone. A Chinese trader from Pante Makassar, Leong Kim<sup>147</sup>, used to come and buy sandalwood trees, which were extracted from the forest with the full cooperation of its customary authorities, and one incredible day about 20 years before he was born, a Japanese ship was bombed from the air and wrecked off the beach (Carey and Nielson, 2002), but apart from that Ben Uf was mostly left alone. Its forests were rich in honey, sandalwood, and betel nut, but also feared, because in West Timor, forests are thought to be haunted by terrifying and territorial spirits.<sup>148</sup> One informant swore that the devil emerged from the trees in the form of a black snake with two heads and attacked his father, another that an unseen hand had plucked him off his motorbike while crossing a stream and he was thrown into the water. When I said I wanted to go to *nais fui* (wild forests) of Ben Uf, people didn't say *la bele* (T: you can't), but *kuidadu, iha ne'eba lulik makas* (T: careful, over there the magic is strong), which amounted to the same thing. The days when Jose's uncle, along with his *meob* (warriors) and his priests (*tobe*) had kept outsiders out with swords, flintlocks, and spells (*malo*)<sup>149</sup> were decades gone, but the power of their watchful spirits to act as guardians was as strong as ever.

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<sup>147</sup> His descendants now run the popular Hotel Rao on the main street of Oecussi.

<sup>148</sup> Material from this chapter has adapted for an upcoming article in *Oceania*.

<sup>149</sup> See Meitzner Yoder (2011b) for a more extensive discussion of Oecussi's ritually forbidden forests in the context of the district's history as a centre for the sandalwood trade.

Although there is significant body of historical and ethnographic literature on West Timor's indigenous political systems, much of it revolves around conflict – accounts of *suko* resolving their differences through head hunting and martial magic (*le'u musu*<sup>150</sup>) and inter-clan feuds resulting in exile and the bloody establishment of rival princedoms.<sup>151</sup> Reading through the lens of recent fieldwork in West Timor, what is striking about these historical perspectives is their lack of congruity with how the recent past of princely rule seemed to be remembered today. Far from regaling me with tales of headhunting, looking back from 2015, elders tended to reminisce about the recent past of princely rule with something like nostalgia. Now there was confusion, they said; then, things had been simpler. Spiritual transgression resulted in physical harm, and correct spiritual practice was vested in observance of social conventions, clan hierarchies, food taboos, and ritualized agricultural practices, a suite of beliefs and behaviours referred to collectively as *nonot* and *nuni*. Although the specifics of *nonot* and *nuni* vary from place to place, at its centre is usually a question of access to the land and its resources – in most places something that requires asking permission from its *tuan*, a type of master who not only 'owns' the land but has a special relationship with the potentially dangerous ancestral spirits that inhabit it.

While permission to use the land on a usufruct basis<sup>152</sup> was

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<sup>150</sup> See Middelkoop (1963, 21–23) for more on this.

<sup>151</sup> The best example of this is McWilliam's excellent *Paths of Origin, Gates of Life* (2002).

<sup>152</sup> See Meitzner Yoder (2011b) for an excellent description of conventions surrounding land borrowing and ownership in Oecussi under Meto customary law.

often granted to kin and neighbours in need, in this case the sharing of harvest work and forest products also had socio-political significance. In Ben Uf this was manifested most clearly in an annual harvest ritual held in the late dry season and referred to simply as *'seu puah* (picking the betel nut) when people from Oecussi's eighteen suko were invited<sup>153</sup> to hunt deer and harvest betel nut. The feast was an insoluble combination of the economic, political, and symbolic – the two valuable palm groves, known as Tepas Na'ek and Tepas Ana (little muddy spring and big muddy spring) where the betel nut was harvested were said to have sprouted from seeds brought from a neighbouring island long ago by a legendary king, and now recognized as the property of the current royal line, Da Costa (Meitzner Yoder 2011a), based in Oesono near Pante Makassar. The shared harvesting, preparation, and consumption of the betel that took place at this feast acted as recognition of the continuing relevance of both the old kings and the new ones as spiritual beings and focal points for Meto identity.<sup>154</sup>

Jose only had limited knowledge of the feast's political and spiritual subtext because in 1973, aged about eight, it was of no interest to him. For him *seu puah* simply meant food and

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<sup>153</sup> Invitation is the correct word. To this day *naijuuf*, *tobe* and other ritual leaders will send their *mafefa'* (messengers, speakers) to issue those invited with short pieces of grass or twine with four or five knots tied into it known as a *faes*. A knot is cut off each day, ensuring even in a place where calendars and clocks were unknown until recently, there is no chance of missing the day.

<sup>154</sup> In her thesis, Meitzner Yoder (2005, 241–248) provides a detailed case study of this event.

friends to play with.<sup>155</sup> Even when I knew him, middle-aged and recently separated, with his daughter on the phone in tears from boarding school in Atambua saying she hated it there and wanted to come back, it still made his eyes light up to speak of it. In the weeks before the rains came, he said, people from throughout Oecussi would congregate near the palm groves on the banks of the Iron River (Noel Besi).<sup>156</sup> Early on the morning after everyone arrived, a cow horn would be blown, signalling that on this day everyone could gather the *usif's* betel nut and hunt deer in the *naijuuf's* usually forbidden forest tract of Oel Nain.<sup>157</sup> There was, in Jose's vivid recollection, the barking of dogs as people went hunting, the squeal of pigs carried in to slaughter later, the sea of cooking fires in the evening when everyone had returned to camp and *bilu*, *bonet* and *lelan* (circle dance songs) were they danced to a rhythm beat out with drums and gongs and foot bells (*ke'e*, *so'ot ma sene*). Venison would be served, as well as pork and a dish so popular it is still known simply as *alekot* (good), which consists of chopped up pigs' intestines stewed in pig's blood. It had

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<sup>155</sup> To this day, it is noticeable how people from remote villages value the novel bustle of human activity at weddings and family gatherings, a happy sense they describe using an Indonesian loanword, *rame*.

<sup>156</sup> Jose was clear that the prohibition on arbitrarily harvesting Da Costa's areca nuts was separate from the prohibition on hunting and taking sandalwood from the *naijuuf* Koa's forest.

<sup>157</sup> Jose didn't know exactly when the prohibition of hunting and timber cutting in the forest (*nais rala*) had begun although he attributed it to the desire of his ancestors (T: *avo sira*) to 'protect nature'. It was clearly important to him that, in his own way, he was continuing their work. Maintaining a monopoly on the extraction of resources (especially valuable sandalwood) from the area would have also provided an economic motivation for the ban.

been '*furak*,' he said (T: wonderful).

In later years Jose would be sent away to be educated in Dili, where during the worst of the occupation, he would learn lessons about the extremes of human cruelty at the same time as he attended high school. At the funeral of young Sebastio Gomes, murdered by the Indonesian police, the Indonesian army opened fire and massacred hundreds. After he graduated, he took a course in environmental engineering in Kupang. While he was away, many of the betel nut trees were chopped down, a road was forced through and his grandfather became a figurehead rather than a ruler. With the rapid growth in the population on the coast and the formal disestablishment of the *naijuuf*'s authority, the palm groves, damaged by over-harvesting and the encroachment of swidden gardens, were reduced to a shadow of what they were. When I knew him, he had returned to Oecussi, to the town rather than his native *suko*, where he worked as a bureaucrat in the section of the agricultural department that looked after Oecussi's forests. He said he felt good in the forest, better than he did in the town, and surrounded his cinder-block room with potted ferns, succulents, and saplings that he cultivated from cuttings he collected there. Inside he kept Indonesian language books on environmental management and policy he had brought back from West Timor. He was a gaunt figure with black hollows under his eyes that hinted at sleepless nights. Although he was proud of working for the *ambiente* (environment), and believed passionately and personally that what remained of the forest should be protected, his only real duty was to sign off on the destruction of hundreds of trees for the highway ZEESM planned to build through his village, and his life was in many ways a stressful one.

Like so many others, he had hidden in the forest during the war of 1999. In fifteen years of working with Timorese I heard a lot of war stories, but never met anyone who remembered their time in hiding with the same longing he did. The stories he told made me think of magical realism,<sup>158</sup> although a better phrase might be magical reality. The militia had been looking for them, he said, but what they didn't know was that one of their number was sneaking off at night to warn those hiding in the forest of where they would be the next day. Once, though, the spy wasn't able to warn them in time, which is when the swarm of bees came down from heaven (T: *tun husi lalehan*) to protect them.

I pressed him for details on how this happened. Had they attacked the militia and driven them off? No, the bees had just enveloped (T: *haleu*) the fugitives and made it impossible for them to come to harm.

Jose was too tactful to say, though sometimes other people did, that there were things that foreigners could never understand.

In a way, Jose's somewhat tortured domestic life seemed to dovetail with the drive he felt to 'protect nature'. He told me he missed his daughter, and I could never bring myself to ask about the situation with his wife. Riding home late I would spot him sometimes walking pensively along the side of the road, seeming unable to sleep, and a particularly poignant sight in a place where most are wary of moving about after dark and prefer to spend their evenings at home with family. Whatever the exact nature of his troubles were, it was in the

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<sup>158</sup> Forshee (2006, 68) also comments on the tendency of Timorese narratives of war and survival to evoke this Latin American genre.



forest that they were most bearable. Just as it had once been a place for him and his family to shelter from the physical threat of the militia, now its existence, particularly the still mostly intact tract of wild forest of Oel Nain, offered respite from the sadness of his personal life.

Late one afternoon, after a long walk back from the mountains, I nodded off in a plastic chair and opened my eyes at dusk to be startled by Jose standing beside me smoking a cigarette. He said he had heard from his older brother who lived in Ben Uf that a group of men had been seen illegally hunting deer in Oel Nain. Except in a few deep, spring-watered valleys, the mountains of Oecussi tend to be dry – the soil overworked, the trees hacked down, and even the remaining forest silent because the birds have all been flicked out of the sky with powerful slingshots made from old motorbike tyres. Oel Nain was different. Even after Jose's uncle officially lost power as the *naijuuf*, it was protected under the law of the Indonesians.<sup>159</sup> It was protected in 2015 too, although whether this represented a revival of local custom, a legacy of Indonesian law or some mysterious dictate from Dili, no one could explain. He said that the forest there was old forest, still *frescu* (T: cool/refreshing) and full of birdsong (T: *iha ne'eba ne'e ita bele rona manu lian*), and that it was his duty as a *fursionariu ambiente* to protect it. He asked if I would like to come with him, and if he could borrow my camera. We would

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<sup>159</sup> Some sandalwood was harvested from the area during the Indonesian occupation by timber merchants working with the TNI. While the previous cutting of trees had been done with the permission of locals and in a way, that enabled them to seek the acquiescence of from the land's spirits, during the Indonesian time the army came with guns and simply took what they wanted.

leave the next morning at five.

### Cloaking kingship – the Koa and the consolations of a failing state

The Koa family are said to have arrived in Ben Uf from an unknown location in Dutch Timor sometime in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although the details of how they came to hold a position of authority is not one to which I was privy as an outsider,<sup>160</sup> their ascension to the status of *naijuuf* is in keeping with the common Austronesian pattern of rulers of outside origin being counterpoised with autochthonous figures holding precedence in spiritual matters. With their *sonaf* in a highland village and their rule vested in the allegiance of Meto clans, it was only in the 1950s when Jose's father was sent to school in Pante Makassar that their fortunes became directly entangled with the colonial authorities.<sup>161</sup>

Although the replacement of indigenous names with Euro-

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<sup>160</sup> I asked, but within Meto-speaking areas it is not considered acceptable to speak casually about history and no suitably senior man who was willing to tell me the story was found during my time there. The reality of ancestral spirits is taken for granted by most, and sharing tales of the past without their authorization is considered likely to provoke their ire.

<sup>161</sup> This is not to say he had been using any first name before. From day to day, most Meto have two names. One personal given name (*kana meto*) and a second name that is usually derived from the father's first name rather than their family. So, for example, my friend Anton of the Sulu clan was known on all his official documents as Anton Sobe – Sobe having been the first name of his father. Despite this he made the deliberate choice to discontinue this practice with his own children, whose second name was registered as Sulu, explaining to me that in an age of globalization, maintaining Meto naming customs was just too confusing.

pean ones has often been a hallmark of domineering colonial regimes, if this was an attempt to co-opt the Koa clan it didn't succeed. Rather, it appears that what Portuguese education did was entrench and exacerbate inequalities that were already present within Ben Uf. Like the Sulu, while the ancestors of the subsistence farmers ruled over by the *naijuuf* Koa by and large remain subsistence farmers today, through his education Jose's father secured a job as a minor official with the Portuguese, and later their Indonesian successors, and made certain that his children were educated, sending them away to Dili to attend high school and later supporting Jose during his studies in Kupang. After independence, Jose's older brother was elected head of the village (*xefe suko*) and his younger brother became renowned as a clever mechanic, smuggler, and road contractor who designed and built the only large house in the suko's one substantial settlement, Citrana.<sup>162</sup> It was here, after a long, rough motorbike ride along the coast road, that we stopped to collect information on the location of the poachers. We were told that people had heard the barking of a pack of dogs up in the hills, and suspected that they might belong to deer hunters. Paulo, the husband of one of Jose's natal sisters would act as our guide (and, I suspected, bodyguard) as we tried to run them to ground.

While hunting was once a common way for people in Oecussi

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<sup>162</sup> Local accounts describe Citrana as having been established to facilitate the sale of sandalwood to Chinese traders. In part because the maps of today draw on their colonial predecessors, and in part because Citrana remains the only place in the suko that is easily accessible by road, contemporary sources show it as a town, although in reality it consists of a thin spread of kiosks and houses barely distinct from surrounding agricultural land.

to obtain protein (and continues to be in the still-forested Lautem district in the nation's far east, see McWilliam 2006, 266) this is no longer the case.<sup>163</sup> Its decline in Oecussi occurred gradually and should be considered as part of a more general trajectory away from foraged food towards locally grown and (increasingly) imported cereals. There has been little systematic study of how agriculture first came to Timor. People are thought to have lived on the island since as early as 40,000 years BCE, with the present-day population traceable to successive waves of Papuan and Austronesian speakers who arrived between 8000 BCE and 2000 BCE (O'Connor 2007, 523–535 and Schapper, 2014, 7). It is probable that some form of gardening arrived on the island around this time, although the crops that define Timorese life appear to have come later – rice from elsewhere in Southeast Asia and maize and cassava from South America (Oliveira 2008). Glover (1986, 86), one of the few to make a study of the issue, concludes 'direct evidence for plant cultivation is not present until much more recent times'. While Fox (1988) shows clearly how the shifting cultivation of maize (along with the introduction of firearms) was definitive in the expansion of the Meto across West Timor from the 16th century, enabling the population to grow and periodically spurring clans to light out in search of arable land, it appears that hunting and foraging in the forests remained important until recent times. Informants in Oecussi told stories of how, long ago (*un-unu*), people had lived 'wild' in the forest and survived largely off hunted meat, tubers,

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<sup>163</sup> It is noteworthy that fishing and littoral foraging have never been important food sources for the Meto, and until recently most were reluctant to live near the coast. By way of contrast see McWilliam (2002b) on the coastally orientated Fataluku people of Lautem district.

and fruit. But Meto historiography is chronologically opaque, and it is likely that ‘wild food’ still formed a substantial part of highland diets as recently as 100 years ago. Shepherd and Palmer (2015) argue that the shifting cultivation of rice and maize, which is now thought of as ‘traditional’, seems to have been significantly shaped by the colonial state, with the establishment of cereal production as the economic basis of upland life contemporaneous with the advent of direct Portuguese rule – a change prompted, it seems, by the authorities’ desire to have their subjects grow something they could tax<sup>164</sup> (295). They cite a colonial official frustrated in his efforts to get people to do this who, in 1915, described the people of Oecussi as ‘dawdlers’<sup>165</sup> who preferred to reject his sage agricultural advice and ‘go out into the forest to search for sago and wild beans (293).’

This shift away from hunting and gathering accelerated during the *tempu Indonesia*. In Timor-Leste, this period is popularly remembered as a time marked by a change of preference from locally sourced food to diets dominated by often imported white rice. Da Silva (2016, 90) recalls a common Indonesian saying, *kalau belum makan nasi belum makan* (‘If you have not eaten rice, you have not eaten’) as exemplifying the official attitude. Once a luxury enjoyed mostly by wealthier populations on the coast, after 1975 the

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<sup>164</sup> There were also attempts to encourage the population to grow coffee (see McWilliam and Shepherd 2013), although they were never particularly successful.

<sup>165</sup> His sentiments were echoed by his compatriots working as schoolteachers in the enclave 100 years later, who similarly tended to describe the Timorese schoolteachers they were supposed to be mentoring as lazy and uninterested in learning their ways.

daily consumption of rice gradually became a norm if not an expectation for many, with maize and other locally grown foods stigmatized by their association with the very poor (Castro 2011, 31). This situation continues to prevail today, with the Timorese government importing rice from Vietnam and selling it at a subsidized price. Such policies, changing dietary preferences and the simple reality that there is far less forest than there used to be means that hunting and gathering has ceased to be central to the diets of most.<sup>166</sup> The once sparsely populated lowlands of Oecussi were known for their abundance of wild pigs, deer, monkeys, and possums, all of which were regularly hunted for meat, but have now been extirpated from most parts of the enclave. Most boys in Oecussi carry<sup>167</sup> around slingshots they will use to kill any surviving small animal unwise enough to show itself.<sup>168</sup> In the past, Jose explained to me, people had no choice but to

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<sup>166</sup> The significant exception to this, at least when it comes to gathering food, is during times of crop failure. One reliable witness from the highland village of Abani told me of how when he was a child, things got so bad they resorted to eating the boiled bark of a tamarind tree. Nonetheless, even in remote areas, the state rather than the forest has become the preferred fallback. Asked what action they would take during a really bad famine, people told me they would make their way to the town, where, whatever else might happen, they would not starve. A government official commented to me that he could always tell when mountain communities were under food stress because people from the highlands started appearing on the coast trying to use mosquito nets to catch fish.

<sup>167</sup> Wear may be a more apt description than carry. The elastic of the slingshot is stretched around the head of its young owner, so he is able to run about with both hands free.

<sup>168</sup> They could also turn them on bicycle-borne *kase*. Staying on their good side was important.

get their meat from the forest, but now things were different. Animals were rare, and those killing them were denying future generations the right to benefit from their existence. The men we were chasing were not hunting deer (T: *lasu bibi rusa*), they were harming/violating them (T: *estraga bibi rusa*).

After years in classrooms and offices, Jose's body was no longer accustomed to the hills, although even gasping for breath as we ascended the slopes in pursuit of the men who would *estraga bibi rusa*, he was able to sum up why the old Meto political system was no longer important: *agora democracia mosu ona* (now we have democracy). His statement was in keeping with a school of thought with roots traceable to colonial times: that development could be simply defined as the replacement of 'primitive' indigenous patterns of social organization and subsistence with ones considered inherently superior through their association with a fabulously wealthy and far-flung *metropole*. Under the new special economic zone, the plans drawn up for the district are striking in their lack of detailed reference to any aspect of indigenous cultural, political, or economic life, apparently proposing the construction of an entirely new economy from the ground up, either ignoring or in some cases literally bulldozing the one that is already there (Meitzner Yoder 2015). As for Jose, while appreciative for my curiosity, he wanted me to understand that the old ways were no longer of real-world significance. The *naijuuf* was not in power, forest creatures could not be killed with impunity and everyone has to follow Dili's law. This was *realidade*.

The people we met on the trail seemed surprised to see Jose coming, especially with a foreigner, but greeted him warmly regardless. To Jose's clear embarrassment they addressed

him as *usi'* (king) and reached out to take his hand and press it their forehead, a gesture known as *neik niman*. Among the urban population *neik niman* exists today mostly as something small children do for seniors or parishioners to their priests<sup>169</sup> (whenever I visited a house for the first time, shy children were admonished to kiss the hairy hand of the foreigner; they usually assumed I was priest), but in places like the back of Ben Uf it continues to be a way of showing respect for the local ruling clan. Most of those we met that morning were older; the young mostly preferred to leave the village if they could in search of wage-labour or education in the lowlands, and such obsequious behaviour from his father's friends clearly made him feel embarrassed. The mountain folk were dressed in the customary way, *betis* (a loom-woven wrapping) around the waist, *benas* (machete) slung over the shoulder along with an *aluk* (bag, usually containing betel nut and lime) and greeted him in the customary manner by calling him *usi'* and taking his hand, which, when they tried to raise it to their foreheads, he refused to move, smiling in a way that made him look stubborn, childish, flattered, and embarrassed at once. It was a telling image. While in the town it had been easy to believe Jose's insistence that his status as an *usi'* was irrelevant and that hunting was simply illegal, here this was less a neutral observation of how things were than a judgement-loaded statement about how they should be.

Non-Meto politics had never exercised sustained control in the hills of Ben Uf, and that Jose was able to function there

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<sup>169</sup> Interestingly Roque (2012) identifies this practice as an indigenized legacy of the subservience shown to Portuguese officials and clergy in the 19th century.



at all as a state representative suggests how strongly the old ways still resonated. While the interior of Ben Uf had not been completely cut off from state influence or global markets, its remoteness had limited the role of both. Growing their own food, speaking their own language, praying to their own ancestors, and resolving issues by recourse to the *naijuuf* Koa or his forebears, the authority of the state had not been a daily concern, and the goods that were traded in – kerosene, sacks of rice, and machetes perhaps the most common, were useful but not the focus of everyday desire. What Jose’s authority in the area appears to show is how, in postcolonial polities where the state power is recent, governance that seems to be projected (poorly) from the capital, may in fact be constituent of older (and quite effective) local forms of authority. That Jose felt the need to overtly decry the Meto political order of which he was so clearly part as a thing of the past is particularly salient, highlighting how this dynamic may sometimes be cloaked by the desire of those who are invested in both worlds to align themselves with high-status, ‘modern’ ways. The final part of this chapter will focus on this distinction, working to explore how regimes of governance originating in pre-state polities can be reproduced by the daily practice of the national projects intended to replace them.

## The constraining – and enabling – effect of meto perspectives on kase law

After two hours of slogging over the hills, our shadows were beginning to lengthen. With no villages in the area, and no way of getting back to Citrana before dark, it became clear that we were going to spend the night hungry and cold along a river bed in an area known for its *ular hijau* (I: green pit vipers). Jose was struggling, the back of his shirt soaked through with sweat, and though he demurred when I tried to take his bag, after a second he relinquished it with relief. We had only brought one small bottle of water with us, now empty, and he was becoming seriously dehydrated. It was surreal to think we were here on government business. Before anthropology I had worked with the Australian Department of Agriculture's international cooperation office, where even low-level functionaries were governed in their everyday work by thousands of neatly, numbered rules and regulations intended to ensure safety, control, and order. Though the rules could be irksome, they became integral to the sense of identity and security of those who worked there. Failure to meet standards tended to provoke genuine outrage: 'You're not doing your job!'

As discussed in detail in Chapter 3, my first encounter with Oecussi was as a UN adviser placed in a Timorese government office to make sure they did things such as keep meeting minutes, systematic records, and turn up to work on time – part of an attempt to export this form of tightly controlled, law-governed bureaucracy. Only by at least appearing to meet the norms of government as they worked in the wealthy world would the Timorese have access to its largesse in the form of

aid dollars.

Although a baking hillside in remote Ben Uf may have been an unusual place to have such a realization, it was there that the utility of Ferguson's thought on governance in the postcolonial world became clear. Drawing on his fieldwork in Zambia and Lesotho, Ferguson (cited in Schouten, 2009) describes how assumptions about the universal 'correctness' of centrally governed states can impoverish understandings of what is really there. Such perspectives, he argues, are liable to cast much of the postcolonial world as a somehow lesser space, 'where things ought to be but aren't', or function in a way that defies 'common sense'. Certainly, given any internationally accepted understanding of how a government should work, the reality that hunting in Oecussi was policed by a man motivated by his own connection with the forest helped with a relative with a machete, a mandate from his uncle the *naijuuf*, and a camera cadged from a foreigner, is almost a cliché of state failure. Ferguson's challenge, however, is to look beyond this paradigm, engaging with informants not as development subjects who need to change, but as free agents acting within regimes of governance that, while unfamiliar, are still worthy of respect and inquiry.

In Ben Uf the nature of these regimes was difficult to access, largely because people like Jose wouldn't admit that they were still important. As discussed above he would have had me believe I was observing the work of an exemplary, if under-resourced, young democracy. It was only after we caught up with the deer hunters that the truth of what was happening was clearly revealed. The sun had almost vanished and we were inching our way down a narrow goat track to a dry river when we heard the sound of excited dogs and men from the

opposite hill side. We stopped in our tracks.

'*Hai mipein ben,*' said Paulo. 'We've found them.'

We caught up with the deer hunters and their quarry at the end of a narrow gully cooled by a palm forest. McWilliam (personal communication) has described how, in the well-watered east of Timor-Leste, semi-professional hunters keep large and well-fed dogs, but these were underfed animals, five or six of them of a sort common to any Oecussi village where the people struggle to get enough to get enough rice to eat, let alone meat to feed the dogs. Small though they were, the dogs had managed to corner the deer, a large male with fearsome antlers, up against a rocky outcrop where one of the hunters killed it by slashing it several times across the head with a machete. Considering they were far from any villages and had no idea that anyone else was in the area, it must have come as surprise to them to be caught, but they didn't look startled. For what seemed like minutes no one said anything, the only sound was that of the dogs growling and snapping each other as they chewed at the deer's tough hind. There were four men, and if before Jose had been embarrassed that people insisted on calling him Usi, now he was clearly happy for the deference he commanded. Still unsteady from the long walk, he tottered about examining the evidence, the trail of disturbed leaf litter showing how the animal had tried to save itself, the men standing about its corpse clutching their bloody machetes and looking sheepishly down at their feet.

'Why did you do this, eh?' He was directing them to stand in front of the dead animal, motioning for me to give him the camera as he spoke. The men kept their eyes on the ground and shuffled their feet as they stood around the dead animal. They clearly knew there was no point talking back to him.

The camera made a cheerful electric shutter noise with every damning image it snapped. ‘Stupid. There’s a two-thousand-dollar fine, you know?’ he said, clicking the button again and again.



*The hunters and their quarry (photo Mike Rose)*

We ate with the hunters that night and later slept alongside them in the dry riverbed, rocks as our pillows. One of them knew of a spring and set off with a jerry can to fetch us some water. Jose knew most of the hunters by name, although he hadn’t seen them in years they had been around the village when he was a kid. One was the man who saved Jose’s life and that of his family in 1999 by sneaking away to warn them where the militia would be. Later, after they had finished butchering the deer and stringing it from sticks for the long

walk back to Citrana, I talked to him about what had just happened. How was it that he had been so confident in confronting four armed men in a remote jungle? Before we had left, he had mentioned to me that some of the villagers reported hearing the occasional gunshot echoing out from these remote hills. It was chillingly easy to imagine how things could have gone horribly wrong.

He admitted that he had known all along that he could rely on the authority he commanded through his association with the line of *naijuuf* who had customarily controlled hunting in the forest. Anywhere else, even if he were able to find the hunters, he said he couldn't have safely done the same thing without a police escort. In the mountains of Ben Uf, at least in this instance, it was only by drawing on authority lodged in the *meto* that this *kase* law was enforceable.

And what of the dinner we had just enjoyed? Fresh deer from a forbidden forest chewed right off the bone?

Jose had to smile. He said they had actually offered him some of the meat to take home. Even in this bizarre situation, the ordinary rules of Timorese sociality were still what mattered. He had politely refused, saying it might look a bit strange. As for what we had just eaten, with no other food, a long night ahead of us, and a deer that, whatever other socio-legal scenarios might come to pass, wasn't going to come back to life, there didn't seem to be any point in not having our fill. Just as this limited enforcement of the state law was enabled by the continuing relevance of a *meto* political reality, so too was it constrained by the persistence of a corresponding physical one – the simple, age-old truth that for the highland *Meto*, meat is rare, hunger and boredom are not, and the idea that a deer is for anything but food is a strange and shameful indulgence.

It was clear that here, *kase* law was only relevant insofar as it was able to draw upon the authority of the *meto* ways that had come before it.

## Conclusion

Although I had originally been excited to be part of the expedition, the hunters' evident misery on being caught was heartbreaking. Earlier, Jose had told me about how hunting meat had once been okay (although not in *this* forest), but now the animals needed protection. Hunting didn't represent an ongoing source of protein for these men and their families, but it was a supplement, which even if not enough to make a real difference to their health, was a source of joy and excitement. And into this happy day, when they for once in their life had an abundance of food, I had stumbled with my camera and glib assumptions about the righteousness of state environmental regulations and ruined everything. I felt terrible, and told Jose that if they did end up getting a fine, I'd pay it.

'There won't be any fine,' he told me. Hunting had been forbidden in Oel Nain during the time of the princes and the *tempu Indonesia*. Everyone had known it. But now they had their *liberdade*, things were no longer so clear. People like the deer hunters, he told me, were confused about the meaning of the word. They thought it meant they could do what they liked, but they had misunderstood, and it was unfair to punish people who had acted out of ignorance rather than malice. When we were back in the lowlands he would call a meeting with head of the hamlet (*bairo*) where the men lived, along with his uncle the *naijuuf* and his older brother, the present-day *xefe suko*. The *tobe* would be there too, animist priests descended

from district's original clans who had been responsible for managing the forest's resources in the past and were still key for interceding with its spirits. They would hold a ceremony in which the hunters would pledge to the ancestors that they would look after the land and its creatures (including deer), and examine the liver of a sacrificial pig to understand what the ancestors made of the matter. No one would be out of pocket; no one would go hungry. Proud as Jose was of his status as a government employee, it was clearly the *meto* part of his identity – the one in which it was his duty to care not just for the forest tract of Oel Nain but the people who referred to him as Usi – that went deepest.

At the beginning of this chapter I touched on the work of Murray Li (2014) and showed how, in her writing on Sulawesi, she came to question whether the 'relations of care' embedded in the customary ways of many self-governing upland communities can survive substantial contact with the outside world. Jose's interaction with the deer hunters suggests that in Oecussi, they can and do. There, *kase* ideas and institutions are enabled only through their ability to draw upon already existing and deeply felt local understandings of life. What this appears to mean is that, at least in remote areas, outside laws are often only enforceable to the extent that they can be brought into line with *meto* norms and perspectives, including the presumption of mutual support that is embedded within the pre-state political hierarchy. Thus, while Jose was willing to use the empty threat of a fine to chastise the hunters (which, at \$2000, was such a large amount to be virtually meaningless), everyone was aware that, as a representative of the ruling line, he would put the interests of his subjects first, and not come down too hard on people whom he knew very



well were simply trying to sustain themselves.

When Jose and the deer hunters (loaded up with meat) started the steep climb out of Oel Nain the next morning, the unhappiness that had been so palpable the afternoon before had mostly dissipated. That night on the riverbed, as we shared the deer, there had been a chance to talk things over and renew old acquaintances. Social and family ties were re-established, old times (including memories of the 1999 war) reminisced over, and present-day struggles shared.

Ultimately, what this discussion of Jose and his pursuit of the deer hunters suggests is the utility of Ferguson's challenge for an ethnographically inspired reconsideration of what constitutes good governance in out-of-the-way places. Local actors, even if invested in outside ideas, still act within the bounds of local social and spiritual frameworks. In the case of Jose, we saw how this both enabled him to take the work of the central government to the hills, and made it unthinkable for him to mete out the state's mandated punishment once there.

While, from certain development and state-building perspectives, this may seem dysfunctional or even corrupt, it could just as easily be seen as the continuation of a legitimate local mode of ordering life and nature through, rather than despite, the modern state. In a place where hegemonic control is closely associated with colonialism, and has tended to result in confusion or bloodshed, the consideration of such a perspective seems to be both timely and necessary.

## 7

### Chapter 7: Ritual speech and education in Kutete

When anthropologist Michael Jackson arrived in the village of Firawa in Sierra Leone during the late 1960s, the outside world still seemed far away. He wrote of how the socio-spiritual realm of his subjects was contingent upon physical place – a way of being defined by indigenized Islam, oral historiography, and intimate knowledge of their fields and forests. As in any remote hamlet, life in Firawa could be difficult, but Jackson observed how, in their daily struggles, people were comforted by a feeling of socially mediated control and understanding. There, he wrote, ‘what you give in the course of your life will somehow be given back, and whatever you receive will be shared. You respect your elders, parents and rulers and in return they protect you and see to your welfare’ (Jackson, 2005, 69).

Returning 50 years later, Jackson was struck by how this system had broken down. The old modes of authority had been swept away by civil war and the growth of the state. Rather than focus on the transformation of the village he had known

into a struggling town, he took as his subject the plight of its youth who once would have passed their lives in the fields, but now eked out a precarious living on the streets of the capital or in faraway England. For them, he writes, ‘the time-honoured roles of gender and of age together with hereditary chieftaincy, cult associations and labour collectives, are no longer binding or viable. The dreams of the village are no longer their dreams’ (2013a, 132).

Like the hinterland of Sierra Leone, Oecussi is also a place where recent decades of political upheaval and population growth have left little unchanged in the way people live. At the end of Portuguese rule in 1975, most passed their lives in isolated *kuan*, where direct interaction with the outside world was unusual and intermittent despite centuries of colonial intervention. Now, even those who don’t live in coastal Pante Makassar have relatives that do, and connections to the cash economy and the national capital are the norm. The young move to town for high school, and if they have any choice about it, rarely come back to live (McWilliam, 2015). While Jackson writes of this shift away from village life as one marked by dislocation, what has emerged from my research is that for the Meto at least, this is not necessarily the case.

As discussed in the previous chapters, like many of their Austronesian neighbours (Barnes 2008, 343–353) Meto customary realms are structured around the negotiated accommodation of strangers. Historically these were individuals or groups<sup>170</sup> who (if not resisted) were invited to settle and were given wives, land, and authority. In return these newcomers

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<sup>170</sup> Predominantly from elsewhere in Timor, although also including people from Rote and Savu (see Meitzner Yoder 2011b, 193).

would accept and recognize as indispensable the spiritual precedence of those who received them. The way people in current-day Oecussi live and work continues to reflect this framework.<sup>171</sup> Although ‘modern’ perspectives are coming to be dominant, success in urbanized realms continues to be inseparable from continued engagement with and acknowledgement of older and ever-present ancestor spirits. In this way, embracing the new (or perhaps just accepting its inevitability) by no means implies being disconnected from what came before. Here I set out to show how ways of understanding and interacting with the world lodged in Oecussi’s pre-state socio-political system remain important to how highlanders interact with the national education system today, effectively reconfiguring the ‘modern’ as *meto* in order to establish a sense of control over bureaucratic and economic realities that might otherwise seem bewildering.

This chapter is focused on a close reading of a ritual speech performance (*uab natoni*) commissioned by the head of Kutete’s primary school to help his students in their exams.<sup>172</sup> But I begin by looking at a separate issue: the village’s reluctance to follow the advice of visiting agronomists to

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<sup>171</sup> It is fitting to again acknowledge the thoughts of Sahlins (2008) and Henley (2004) on the ‘stranger-king’. Unsatisfied with representations of colonial states as ‘predatory institutions encroaching aggressively on the territory and autonomy of freedom loving stateless peoples’ they have been foremost among historians seeking to understand how many indigenous groups in Southeast Asia and the Pacific have, like the *Meto*, sometimes been able to reconcile/legitimize the presence of outside rulers with their own socio-political systems.

<sup>172</sup> Some material from this chapter was adapted for an article in the *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* (see Rose, 2018). Thanks to the suggestions of their anonymous reviewers.

replace their customary practice of shifting ‘slash and burn’ cultivation with less environmentally damaging ‘permanent’ gardens.<sup>173</sup> While the school’s use of ritual speech as an exam aid is striking as an example of indigenous custom employed in the pursuit of urban success, the general refusal of Kutete’s farmers to cooperate with experts who would have them abandon their customary mode of subsistence, shows how the *meto* can also be a means of resisting the new.

In the latter half of 2014, I watched as representatives from Caritas Australia, a Catholic development organisation, visited Kutete as part of a campaign to try to encourage people to transition from the practice of moving agriculture (*lele pindah*) to cultivating manually watered and composted permanent gardens<sup>174</sup> (*lele mbi bale*). The NGO had been active in Oecussi for more than a decade, but had found that instigating change

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<sup>173</sup> Li et al. (2014) provide an extensive overview this issue in a broader Southeast Asian context.

<sup>174</sup> The agricultural sector in Timor-Leste is marked by its low productivity (see Borges et al. 2009). It is dominated by semi-subsistence smallholders who mostly grow dry-land rice and maize in swidden gardens. Over recent decades the fast-growing population and often unreliable rains have made this a tenuous way to make a living (Joseph and Hamaguchi, 2014, 63–80) While international NGOs promoting more productive agricultural techniques have been active in the country since before independence, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI, 2016) currently rates the country as the world’s 9<sup>th</sup> worst for food insecurity, behind Afghanistan. The inability of well-meaning NGOs to affect lasting or substantial change is likely exacerbated by the lack of a committed partner in the national government, whose investment in the sector remains minimal. Of the national budget proposed for 2016, a mere 2 per cent was allocated to the agricultural sector (La’o Hamutuk, 2016).

there was difficult.<sup>175</sup> While there were legends of a time when people had lived in the forest and eaten wild food, and a generation was coming of age who would be happy to never pick up a digging stick again, for as long as anyone could remember the shifting cultivation of rice and maize had always been at the centre of life in the highlands. New agricultural methods, even if more productive, were suspect because they were both unproven and represented a radical divergence from the proper order of things (*atolan*, see McWilliam 2007c, 77) set out by the ancestors, whose conservative nature was a given, and whose continued grace was considered essential to life.

Although one would not know it by looking at any map or government register,<sup>176</sup> arable land in the mountains of Oecussi is divided into small parcels known as *seimu*. Each *seimu* belongs to a single family, who established their claim by being the first to clear it and plant a garden. Tenure is passed on through the male line, with the day-to-day management of plots typically falling to groups of consanguine brothers. The sale of land for money, although common in rice-producing and residential areas near the coast, remains rare. Most highland families have between five and ten such plots, with only one or two being worked each year. In 2014–2015, in Kutete, a common pattern was for one brother to remain in Kutete to tend to agricultural tasks and elderly parents, while

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<sup>175</sup> For more on the long history of outside forces who, motivated by both commercial and humanitarian interests, have tried to curtail swidden farming in Timor, see Thu (2012, 197–214).

<sup>176</sup> The interplay between state-endorsed and customary forms of land tenure and management in Timor are complex. See Batterbury et. al (2015) for an overview of the issue.

the others lived in Pante Makassar or Dili pursuing education and employment.<sup>177</sup>

In July or August, each family<sup>178</sup> would start to discuss where they were going to plant their garden that year. In the past, primary forest was preferred as the soil tended to be better, and by the act of clearing, exclusive rights to cultivate the land thereafter could be established. By 2014, however, what little remained was either on inaccessible mountainsides

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<sup>177</sup> Although the information in this paragraph is based on my own observations, it is appropriate to acknowledge again here the work of human geographer and ecologist Laura Meitzner Yoder (2003, 2007b, 2011b) who has undertaken detailed research on the interplay between customary and government-mediated land tenure practices in Oecussi and Timor-Leste more generally.

<sup>178</sup> *Seimu* were most often worked by patrilineal family groups, usually consisting of a man, his wife, his parents, and their children. Depending on what needed to be done, neighbours and friends would also help out. All were provided with a lunch of rice/instant noodles and coffee, and those who came to help from outside Kutete were paid two dollars per day. Immediate family members, neighbours and friends from Kutete worked for free, with the expectation that the favour would be returned when it came time to tending their own gardens.

or associated with sacred places<sup>179</sup>, and so usually it was a matter of selecting from one of the family's *seimu* and clearing the secondary forest that had grown there since it was last worked.<sup>180</sup> As August moved into September, the hills of Oecussi resounded to the thwack of machetes hitting wood as people started this process by hacking the limbs off any living trees in the area they intended to burn (*pae lele*). The resulting litter of dead branches would be harvested for useful timber and left to dry out. As the heat started to build and the storm clouds came closer, the mountainsides became mottled with patches of denuded forest stripped and made ready for burning.

In October or November, the cleared patches would be set alight (*hotu paet*), the ashes creating a productive bed for maize and rice. The region as a whole would be enveloped in a cloud of smoke, and everyone waited anxiously for the rains that would come, usually, in December or January. After the rains had started and continued for a few days, people

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<sup>179</sup> While visiting the Sulu clan's most sacred place, their old palace complex (*sonaf nasi'*) at Bo'en, I was taken aback by the usually calm family patriarch, Carlos, screaming at an old man he thought had planted his garden too close to the ruins and damaged the few trees still growing there. For me the contrast between plump and well-clothed Carlos, who was understandably saddened seeing the shaded glade he had known as a boy reduced to sunstruck tangle of thorns, and the rake-thin and absolutely *meto* farmer whose respect for the site was secondary to his need to eat, threw into relief the growing divergence between those who have managed to tap into the largesse of the outside world and those who still rely on the land for food. For a historical perspective on the connection between Timorese *lulik* and environmental protection see McWilliam (2001) and McWilliam, Palmer and Shepherd (2014).

<sup>180</sup> Ideally, after being worked, a *seimu* would be left fallow for seven years.



would set out with their digging sticks to begin planting (*seen pena'ane*). This part of the agricultural cycle had ritual as well as practical utility – the seeds were usually ones that had been saved from the previous year's crop and hung from the mother pole of the sacred house.<sup>181</sup> In this way each year's planting was an expression of the belief that the family's ancestors are essential to the continuation of life.

As the maize and rice started to ripen it came time to pull the weeds (*toof ma'u*) that grew with it. Typically, this was a merry affair when the whole village would come out and ward off the boredom of with age-old harvest songs (*sii oe banit*) and belts of *tua sabu* (palm liquor). As the crop neared maturity, villagers would spend days and sometimes nights in the fields watching for birds (*pao kolo*), monkeys, or thieves until finally, a month or two after the end of the rains in March or April, it was time for the feast of the new corn. Then, amid general rejoicing, the first maize was harvested (*seik pena'*) and tied into bundles for smoking in the village's round houses. Catching the ferry to Dili at this time of year was a pastoral experience, with the usually grey and sticky interior hallways rustling with the sheaves people were carrying to the city so that their *kase* cousins wouldn't feel disconnected from the life of the land.

The agricultural cycle in Kutete is punctuated by a series of

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<sup>181</sup> Fox (1993) provides an extensive discussion of the architecture of Meto sacred houses in a broader Austronesian context.

rituals<sup>182</sup> known as *fua pah* (to look up at the land) that bring all the clans of the village together, and are intended to pay homage to common ancestors. Conducting these diligently is believed to be necessary for the harvest to be successful. In this way, in the hills of Oecussi, the idea that a clear distinction can be made between agricultural and ritual work, or that agricultural science can or should be the main consideration when it comes to managing the land and understanding its vicissitudes, flies in the face of what might be rendered into English as 'common sense'.<sup>183</sup> For the people of Kutete the system works, and always has. Yes, there are sometimes poor years, but then they feel like they have an explanation as to what has gone wrong (perhaps even a sense that their suffering is deserved), and a way of making things right. In good years, they see in the harvest the continued presence and care of those who have passed away. In these ways, ritually mediated highland agriculture is more than just a means of staying alive; it is the way the Meto express and reproduce who they are.

As rare guests (in a car nonetheless), Caritas and their escort of government functionaries were welcomed. On the day of

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<sup>182</sup> These ceremonies were reported to me as consisting of securing the rain clouds to the mountains (*ekat ho'e*), eating the new corn (*muah peen fe'u*), and dividing the wet and the dry (*fook nike nok napu*), and are each the responsibility of one of Kutete's three animist priests (*tobe*). As well as being considered essential to a successful harvest, they also serve as a forum to discuss and resolve any interpersonal issues that may have arisen in the village.

<sup>183</sup> Writing this I was reminded a story I often heard while working at the Australian Department of Agriculture about a minister who deflected criticism of a decision he was making regarding food importation laws by saying, 'Of course it's based on science: political science.'

their arrival the best plastic chairs were rounded up,<sup>184</sup> the best *tais* were dusted off and the women assembled early to fry donuts and fill jugs of coffee. The villagers sipped their drinks and ate their snacks and listened politely to what the *kase* had to say – alarming talk about how if the villagers didn’t change their *meto* way of managing the land it might become uninhabitable before their kids were old. Swidden farming was still a viable way of making a living, but anyone could see how things were changing. The forests that had still been there a few decades ago were gone. Springs were drying up. Once reliable streams now seasonally withered into stagnant puddles full of wriggling mosquito larvae, and despite the soil being exhausted and dry, there were more mouths to feed than ever before.

This is a story that is familiar across the lower-income world, where falling mortality and a rising birth rate since 1945 (Livi-Bacci, 2012) have resulted in an unprecedented population surge. Fox (1988, 270) describes how the poor soils and arid climate of Timor spurred the spread of the *Meto* across the western half of the island, with clans periodically setting out to conquer or settle fresh land for growing maize. The name *Kutete* is onomatopoeic, said to be sound like the sound of a machete dicing up meat, which was the fate of the people who were living there when the ancestors of the current

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<sup>184</sup> When it came to furniture, few homes in *Kutete* could boast anything more substantial than a few plastic chairs and a plastic table. When important visitors came, the table was draped in a carefully washed cloth and children would be sent out to round up extra chairs from the neighbours. During the UN period, they learned the hard way that ‘white’ guests often required two chairs put on top of each other, as the weight of well-fed foreigners could cause them to buckle.

residents arrived. But while, in the past, overburdened fields might have resulted in a clan lighting out for new territory, now there was nowhere left to go. The village of Naimeko, over the valley from Kutete, was no longer a rival principedom whose heads could be taken in times of war but a place of compatriots and old school friends. Thirty kilometres away in Kefa, they had become not just foreigners but Indonesians. What would happen instead, should there be too many to feed, is that people would be forced to seek their fortunes in the lowlands. There they would not ‘become *kase*’ in the sense of engaging with urban life on their own terms and supported by a continued connection with the *meto* realm, but forced to subsist on the fringes of the urbanized economy, too poor or ashamed of themselves to travel back to the village, a grim reality that anyone who has ever visited the likes of Mumbai or Jakarta or Manila can appreciate.<sup>185</sup>

Caritas believed that the new farming methods they were promoting might push back the day when some or all of Kutete’s people would become ecological refugees.<sup>186</sup> And yet, after a decade of village meetings and training sessions, each September the mountainsides still went up in smoke. The former chief of the village said he thought that no more than

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<sup>185</sup> For an overview of the massive and often uncontrolled rural–urban population transfer that began in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and continues today see Drakakis-Smith (2000).

<sup>186</sup> Andersen, Pant and Thilsted (2013, 10–13) give a good summary of the current state of the agricultural sector in Timor-Leste and its implications for human development.

10 per cent of the people had taken up the new methods.<sup>187</sup>

One morning in November, while visiting my friends the Koa family (named for a sound made by a type of bird once common in the forests), I was surprised to find everyone out the front of the house preparing to set fire to the *seimu* they were working that year. Maria's youngest son, Jon, was a man of about my age who sometimes acted as a go-between when Caritas visited the village and knew all about composting and climate change and how clearing hillsides could lead to the soil being washed away, but was doing it anyway. He was happy for me to join them in their work – a broiling day of dragging burning logs down a hillside with homemade grappling sticks (*koon lele*). At the end of it, sitting in the shade with singed feet and a face the colour of a beetroot, I asked him why it was that *lele mbi bale* was so slow to catch on. It's not like *lele pindah* was an easy way to make a living, and he himself admitted that permanent gardens were better for the soil and entailed no risk of being burned alive.<sup>188</sup> Objectively speaking, it didn't

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<sup>187</sup> The idea that 'slash and burn' is always a poor choice for highlanders has not gone uncontested. Drawing on data collected among the Kantu of Kalimantan, Michael Dove (1983, 86) argued that official efforts to dissuade the practice have often been motivated by governments seeking to increase their control over peripheral populations, and for many highland populations it is 'highly productive and a rational function of their particular population/land balance.' Despite this there were clear signs that the hillside gardens of Kutete were under stress. Many villagers mentioned to me that it was harder to find arable land than ever before, and while once the village had significant patches of primary forest, these were now nearly all gone.

<sup>188</sup> It wasn't just me who found it hot and dangerous. From time to time people are injured and even killed when wind flares up and causes a fire to run out of control. Horrible foot injuries are particularly common. Everyone agreed it was heavy work (*meup ma'fena'*).

seem like a hard sell.

‘*Forsa la iha,*’ he said simply. Tetun for ‘it has no strength’.<sup>189</sup>

What Jon’s response to my question appears to demonstrate is that, rather than being anachronistic or a result of highland isolation, the persistence of swidden farming in Kutete is a deliberate choice, one its people make in order to maintain a sense of control over their fate. The agricultural techniques promoted by Caritas are based on a premise that the condition of the land and the success of the harvest are dependent on an impersonal and sometimes pitiless nature, which Kutete generally rejects. The *forsa* that Jon associates with the old, ritually supported moving agriculture, may then be seen as lodged not in the power of nature to sustain life and take it away, but the ability of highlanders to reconcile such elemental processes with their own socio-spiritual system. Thus, while the *meto* is rightly translated as indigenous, and despite Kutete’s indifference to scientific agriculture, it would be mistake (and arguably a continuation the sort of colonial thinking that devalued indigenous ways of being) to equate it with the rejection of ‘modern’ knowledge. Rather, what the *meto* seems to be associated with in 2016 is a refusal (one that will be familiar to anyone acquainted with Timor’s wartime

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<sup>189</sup> Peers familiar with Tetun who have kindly read this chapter have suggested that the loanword *forca* here could also mean obligation or compulsion, and that Jon might have meant that Kutete people weren’t adopting the new methods because they weren’t compelled to. Another potential interpretation is that the word, in this context, refers to manpower, or effort. However, from my memory of the conversation (complete with Jon’s resigned ‘what can you do?’ shrug of the shoulders) and later consultation with him and others, I believe that the best English interpretation of what he meant is ‘gravity’ or power in the abstract sense.

resistance) to yield to any idea or institution that negates the agency of highlanders to understand and interact with the world on their own terms. In the days of *atoin anao-mnemmat* (wandering people/clans), those who asked for permission to enter the land (*toit lisenca*) could usually be accommodated, while those who did not were resisted. The same principle still applies today for outside ideas, technologies, and modes of governance.

I now switch my focus from scientific agriculture to a foreign concept that has been embraced by Kutete, formal education, to explore how the *meto* can be a framework for embracing as well as resisting the new.

### Eskola Lalehan

The story behind why the hilltop where Kutete's primary school is located is called Tapehen is now forgotten, but the word means 'lazy'. An Indonesian primary school opened in the area during the 1980s but was burned to the ground in 1999, leaving the area bereft of formal education until a new one was built in the mid-2000s. Perhaps because 'Lazy School' seemed like an inauspicious moniker, the new school was dubbed Eskola Lalehan (T: Heaven School), a reference to Kutete's role as a resistance stronghold when Lalehan was its radio call sign.

On paper, in 2014, Heaven School employed about seven teachers and educated one hundred students from Year 1 through to Year 6. Despite being situated in a new building, replete with a tin roof, a serviceable kitchen, and office furniture, it was only barely functional, something that could be attributed to the tendency of the teachers not to come to

work.<sup>190</sup> Apart from three or four who were from Kutete, all the staff had farms and/or families to manage in the lowlands, and getting to work could mean an arduous walk of around four hours. In theory, they were supposed to stay the week in the village, and for that purpose were each provided with a dirt-floored hut next to the classrooms. There were no functioning toilets and washing facilities consisted of a single hose in the middle of the school grounds. After classes were over, the afternoons were crushingly empty and hot, and the cold nights were unrelieved by so much as an electric light bulb. Even for Timorese who were used to hardship it was unbearable, and it was hard to blame many of the teachers for finding ways not to be there.

While the children (some of whom also often had to walk long distances) could be counted on to be at school each morning, during my year in the village it was rarely possible to predict how many teachers would come. On an average day, three would turn up, on a good day four, although on more than one occasion no one arrived. Only once, after they were tipped off a week in advance that the inspector was coming, did they have a full complement. The children seemed to accept this situation as the norm, and even in the event that there were no teachers, they were happy not to be occupied with farm chores and would mill around playing soccer before drifting off mid-morning. If, as usually happened, only a few teachers ended up coming, the classrooms would be unlocked and the unsupervised children would file in dutifully to run through morning prayers before returning to their games.

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<sup>190</sup> This is not only a Timorese problem. See Guerrero, Leon, Zapata and Cueto (2013) for an overview of the issue across the lower income world.



The only level on which Heaven School really functioned was bureaucratically. The teachers' office was equipped, Indonesian-style, with blackboards providing details of the staff (marital status, religion, number of children in the household, level of education attained and place of birth), which were kept scrupulously up to date. All the staff members, including those who rarely came to work, maintained ledgers in which they kept often falsified information regarding student attendance and marks, and indeed much of the time that they were present was spent on drawing these up and writing end-of-semester reports rather than teaching. Asked about the nature of their work they sometimes referred to themselves as *fursionarius*, a Portuguese loanword associated with permanently employed, typically office-bound, public servants – a description that fit with the weight they tended to give to bureaucratic form over educational substance.

Despite the school's problems, its principal, Nando Soba, was genuinely well intentioned, and believed in what he was doing. He lived in the neighbouring hamlet of Bihala and did his best to be in Kutete during the week. While the other teachers tended to talk about their work in relation to their own lives (usually their desire for a transfer to somewhere other than Kutete), Nando liked to tell me about the coming age of *globalisasaun* for which it was his mission to prepare the *estudante*. Unlike their parents, he explained to me one night as we sat in his hut sipping tea out of tin mugs by the light of a kerosene lamp while a high wind threatened to relocate the school to the lowlands once and for all, these children would have to make their living in the outside world. For this they would need to be *matenek* (smart). Still, with only two or three teachers to help most days, he was limited in what he could

achieve.

The importance that Heaven School placed on the end-of-year exams seemed strange at first, considering the lax approach that was usually taken to issues such as teacher attendance and lesson scheduling.<sup>191</sup> One of the younger teachers, Laban, who took an untypically sceptical approach to life in Timor, explained why in more detail. While the performance<sup>192</sup> of teachers and students was usually not assessed in any meaningful way, the exam results would be submitted to the *departmentu* in Dili. A teacher whose students were failing stood no chance of securing a transfer to somewhere with electricity and motorized transport. 'Just watch,' he told me, 'they'll start coming to work.'

And as the day of the exams began to draw closer the classes did become almost regular. The soccer ball was put away and the children were provided with stacks of old papers and the

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<sup>191</sup> Pisani (2013) describes a similar situation prevailing across the border in Indonesia. There she says, 'schools are stuffed with people [teachers] whose goal is to be a bureaucrat.' At exam time, almost all of the children pass.

<sup>192</sup> As many of the text books were in Portuguese, which was only poorly understood by the teachers and not at all by the children, a typical 'lesson' might involve the teacher uncomprehendingly copying a slab of text on to the blackboard and the children dutifully copying it back into their notebooks.

occasional slap from their increasingly stressed teachers.<sup>193</sup> Laban told me that Nando Soba had asked all the children to ask their parents for 50 cents to put towards a pig.

‘A pig?’

‘*Sin*,’ (yes) he said. ‘They’re going to kill it to ask for help in the exams when they’re walking to the exam centre.’ He smiled ruefully. ‘This is not a school programme, this is *programa* Nando Soba. Ask him, he might let you come.’

### Ritual speech in Oecussi

As with many other aspects of life in Timor-Leste, there is a distinct highland/lowland divide in the way people approach formal speech. In relatively urbanized areas, public address is influenced by a set of conventions that are sometimes referred to as *protokol*. Typically, a single speaker will address the crowd in Portuguese-influenced Tetun (Williams-van Klinken 2002, 2), usually going to lengths to acknowledge all present and thank them for their time – a practice congruent with the concern all Timorese societies share with social differentiation and self-effacing displays of humility. Although such speeches may be combined with Catholic prayer and

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<sup>193</sup> Informants expressed mirth at the idea that children should not be physically disciplined. More than one person explained to me that while *malae* are *matenek* (smart) and thus able to learn without corporal punishment, Timorese could not. This usually involved slapping the children, although beating a child hard or out of anger was considered *siak* (vicious/cruel) and was generally unacceptable. Statements by the Ministry of Education that Timor-Leste now had a ‘zero tolerance’ (Asian Development Bank, 2014, 21) for corporal punishment serve to underline how the pronouncements of government bodies in Timor-Leste tend to be decoupled from the practices that prevail in everyday life.

declarations of gratitude and fealty to the Catholic God, the main subject matter tends to be concerned with political or social rather than spiritual matters. The clear expression of ideas to the intended audience is a factor in how it is put together.

While such modern forms of public address are now common in the mountains of Oecussi, formal occasions are rarely complete without a recital of Meto ritual speech (*uab natoni*). McWilliam (2006, 103) describes this as a style of speaking that is 'both poetic and semantically opaque', characterized by a 'pervasive tendency to speak in parallelism or synonymously paired sets of phrases'. Recitals utilize a form of Uab Meto, which, while largely comprehensible to modern ears was described to me as 'high', with rarely used words sometimes being paired with more common ones for the purposes of alliteration. Fox (2016, 414) takes this tendency as confirming that Meto ritual speech is closely akin to that found on Rote and in Indonesia's Tetun-speaking Belus Regency. The generally inaccessible nature of this tradition to outsiders isn't only due to it being in an obscure register of an already little-known language. The subject matter revolves around a distinctly Meto understanding of space and time in which the boundary between past and present isn't clear.

To this day, *uab natoni* remains ubiquitous and can be heard at any auspicious or spiritually charged occasion, including the opening of sacred houses, the harvesting of crops, and visits to graves or other sacred places. In current-day Oecussi, three main forms of it are practised. The one perhaps most widely heard by outsiders is known as *takabnaab*, in which important strangers are welcomed to the village. In such recitals, the senior men will greet important visitors from outside the

hamlet. One (selected for his way with words) will chant poetic doublets in praise of the guest, which are echoed by his cohort of elders. Performed less publicly, although the subject of an excellent and detailed treatment by McWilliam (2002), are topogenic historical narratives in which the origins of a village or clan are poetically recounted. Most common though is *uab natoni*, a sort of ritualized conversation with the deceased, which is very much part of everyday life and is performed often and with little ceremony as a way of asking the spirit's help and reassuring them they are not forgotten. The practice is gendered (no one I spoke to could recall a female ritual speaker) but apart from that the only qualification required to recite it is being a senior member of the community and having acquired a mastery of ceremonial language and poetic form. After the recital, an animal is killed (usually a pig or a chicken) – its entrails examined for signs of a response from the spirit that was being addressed and its meat forming the basis of a meal shared between this world and the next.

### Children of the charcoal, children of the pencil

To help his children before the exams, the ritual speaker Nando Soba found old Tua Kolo, a man in his mid-60s from Kutete who was known for his affinity with words and spirits. He recited his *uab natoni* at Been Masu (rising smoke), a boulder by a dry stream bed near the boundary between Kutete, and its lowland neighbour, Bobokase. The original plan had been that everyone would ride down on a supply truck heading back to the market, but shortly before it arrived there was a downpour and, fearing that the truck might slide off the trail, it was decided that it was safer to go on foot. The uncomplaining

kids picked up their bedrolls and books and started walking. The Year 6 boys strung the pig upside down from a sturdy branch and took turns carrying it.

It was dark by the time everyone arrived. The housemothers had a fire going to boil up a big pot of white rice and everyone gathered around it. Kolo passed me a glass of *tua sabu*. I noticed that he had already had several himself.

He said:<sup>194</sup>

Neet jen, Uis Bobo.

Afi bae mone ko

Li'aan mone ko mok

Ho bae feto es Uis Kutete.

Ii, mok hit tobe tuuk am tuuk

Mok Tua Kebo nasi'

Mok amaf nasi'

Mok Tua Kolo tobe

Oum ii

He 'molok 'ok kit

Listen, Lord Bobo.

In past times you were the male friend.  
the male child and.

your female friend was Lord Kutete.

Now, with all the priests on both sides.

With venerable old Kebo.

With the old fathers.

With the priest Tua Kolo.

I am coming here.

To speak to you.

That night, when I asked people what Kolo was talking about, no one was able to explain it to me beyond saying (superfluously perhaps) that it was *tradisaun* or *adat*. It seems that, at least in their deeper sense, Kolo's words were little understood. They drew on an understanding of land and life that is quickly fading in Oecussi. Though *professore* Nando Soba's reason for bringing him there was *globalisasaun*, old Kolo's words spoke to a profoundly local Meto understanding of landscape rooted in a time when the globe wasn't even a concept for most; one defined by inspirited rocks and springs rather than roads.

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<sup>194</sup> Acknowledgement to members of the community of Kutete and Owen Edwards for assistance in translating Tua Kolo's words.

This was a world the young no longer lived in nor understood in detail,<sup>195</sup> although as I have suggested throughout this book, the loss of ritual knowledge concerning ancestral spirits does not necessarily render those spirits less powerful. The unfortunate pig trussed up in the dust just outside the firelight cost about 30 dollars – expensive but necessary because only through its death would ‘opening the gate’ to speak to the ancestors be made possible, and only by examining its liver could their will really be known. The readiness of the students’ cash-poor parents to buy it hints at how real the idea of watchful spirits continues to be in the mountains. For them, spending hard-to-come-by *kase* cash to enable *meto* ritual was a necessity rather than a choice.

The political unit central to Tua Kolo’s recital is the *suko*. There are eighteen of these administrative units in Oecussi, where (as in the rest of Timor-Leste) they form the basis for local government. As discussed earlier, today they are discrete villages, each with a government office and an elected *xefe*, but until 1975 they were semi-independent and sometimes warring princedoms ruled over by a *naijuuf* who (in Oecussi) paid tribute to a Portuguese-endorsed king (*usi*) on the coast at Oesono. Gradually, after the 1912 rebellion, colonial rule became more direct, and the colonial regime began to occasionally intervene in their affairs, sometimes altering their borders, sometimes amalgamating or dissolving

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<sup>195</sup> While most in Oecussi are proud of their identity as Atoni Pah Meto, few expressed concern over how various forms of ritual speech, song (*sii*) and dance are not being passed on to the next generation. See Johnson (2015) on the efforts that are being made in Kutete to ensure the continuation of a form of song and dance known as *bonet*.

them.<sup>196</sup> Kutete was one of these, placed under the direct rule of the king's own eponymous *suko*, Costa. According to legend, after the fighting was over Kutete's rebellious *naijuuf* not only challenged Costa's authority but raided his lowland palace and made off with a herd of his cattle.<sup>197</sup> That, more than 100 years after it ceased to exist in the eyes of the state, the idea of Suko Kutete remains central to the ritual life of its people, is testament to the limits of centrally imposed boundaries and place names to define individual identity and spiritual practice.

Until recently there were few roads in Oecussi, and what little travel occurred tended to be along foot-tracks between villages, by its nature socially contingent. Entering a *suko* other than one's own meant paying respects to its inhabitants both earthly and spiritual, and not doing so could lead to physical confrontation or spiritual calamity (typically manifested through illness or bad luck). The advent of roads and central governance largely put an end to this practice, but the ancestors still abide by the rules of an earlier time. Without their help success is unlikely and disaster possible, so knowledge of the old protocols still has value. Because Bihala, the lowland hamlet where the exams were taking place, is

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<sup>196</sup> For an excellent overview of Oecussi's complex colonial history see Meitzner Yoder (2016a).

<sup>197</sup> As well, ceasing to recognize the authority of its *naijuuf*, the people of Kutete tell of how King Costa, with the support of Portuguese soldiers, also personally took control of Kutete's best water source and wet rice fields at a place called Oel Naek (great water). I was shown the ruin of a place (*sonaf*) where it is said that Uis Costa used to stay for a week each year, and was told a small portion of the rice harvest is still given to him as payment for using 'his' land.



in the neighbouring *suko* of Bobokase, in the first ten lines of his *uab natoni*, Kolo humbled himself before its legendary lord, Uis Bobo, reminding him of his past connection with Kutete and asking that the children be allowed to enter and their endeavours be blessed with good fortune.

While there was an old man referred to as Uis Bobo who lived in Bihala until his recent death,<sup>198</sup> nothing Tua Kolo said suggested that he was referring specifically to him. Rather, the Lord Bobo he spoke to seemed to be a figure that represents all the princes of Bobokase to have come before and, in a sense, Bobokase itself – both its people and its physical setting. Seeking permission to enter this domain, Tua Kolo referred to the equivalent figure he is affiliated with, Uis Kutete, as symbolically female. By doing this he acknowledged Kutete's dependence on Bobokase in matters of earthly power and politics (and school exams), while obliquely asserting her precedence in the spiritual realm.

The reason for Kutete being categorized as female in this relationship is hard to ascertain. It is possible that the knowledge had been lost, or was considered so sacred that no one was willing to share it. Nonetheless, several informants recalled having heard that, long ago, Kutete had sheltered Uis Bobo (known as Bobo-kase due to his having married

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<sup>198</sup> His son is technically now eligible for the title but seems to have little interest in using it.

a *kaes metan*<sup>199</sup> from the lowlands) after he was cast out of his home territory by his brother (who not having married a foreigner was known as Bobo-meto). Although he eventually moved on to rule his own *suko*, he never ceased to respect Kutete as the place that had sheltered him – a respect which here is framed through the *mone/feto* (male/female), *tataf/olif* (older/younger), *kase/meto* (foreign/indigenous) dualism that is, as Fox (1989, 198) puts it, is a ‘prevalent conceptual resource in eastern Indonesia’.

Like Uis Kutete and Uis Bobo, the other figures Kolo evoked (‘the priests from both sides’, the old fathers, Lord Kebo) are not physically present. Yet they are there in spirit, a reality that Kolo enunciates as a way of showing that the proper protocols of respect are being observed. I was told that Tua Kebo and ‘the fathers’ referred to the three clans, Kebo, Eko, and Bana, who originally settled Kutete. ‘The priest Kolo’ seems to not be a reference to himself (as he was not a priest (*tobe*) but rather just a man known to be good at ritual speech) but to Kutete’s chief ritual practitioner (*tobe* ‘*naek*) who shares his name, and who is said to be descended from the area’s original inhabitant

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<sup>199</sup> The *Kaes Metan*, or black foreigners, live in the fertile flatlands of the Tono Valley and are distinguished from the rest of the population by their practice of passing down land through the female line and uxrilocal residence (Meitzner Yoder, 2011b, 193). Although their native language is now *Meto* and they don’t remember where their ancestors came from, they are still regarded as distinct by the highland population. Laban came from this area and people had great fun saying, ‘Look, it’s *kaes metan* and *kaes muti*’ (white foreigner) whenever they saw us together.

Ama Tobe, Tua Kolo mok main	Holy Father, venerable Kolo, together with.
Ho ama' sin ok-oke'	All your fathers and.
Ho ina' sin ok-oke'	All your mothers.
Neno ii, fai ii	[on] This day, this night.
Neuba ma skool ini	[we come here for] these schooled ones.
Aan atu ana 'tu'i	[Charcoal children, pencil children.
Lekan kai ben he	Guide us to [so].
Tasoup hiit atu	They can finish holding the charcoal.

Here, Kolo addressed the *tobe* 'naek of Kutete, as well as the spirits of his ancestors, male and female ('your fathers and mothers'), explaining why they have come to meet with Uis Bobo. Though Kolo himself had almost certainly never been to school, he was familiar with the concept of *kase* education, something that could not be said of the spirits to whom he was speaking. While he does refer to the students as 'schooled', he makes sure to also describe them in terms that will resonate with the ancestors, specifically 'charcoal children, pencil children'. This appears to be a reference to the two objects that, before cheap ballpoint pens, would have been only means by which Meto highlanders could 'write'.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>200</sup>This is not to say that Timorese communities did not find other ways of visually representing themselves. Paulino (2016) mentions wood carving, architecture and weaving as sorts of 'figurative writing' that existed before the arrival of conventional literacy.

INDIGENOUS SPIRITS AND GLOBAL ASPIRATIONS IN A SOUTHEAST ASIAN  
BORDERLAND

<u>Neu, hit bale es ii</u>	[Uis Bobo] your place is here.
<u>Es Bihala, es Boboloa</u>	It is Bihala and Boboloa.
<u>Es ho ma ttee ii</u>	We have arrived here.
<u>He ttanhai ko msa' at ka naleok</u>	[So] it is not good to pass you by.
<u>He tfini ko msa' at ka naleok</u>	Not good to jump over you.
<u>Maut, 'aitan amaf nua, naijuuf nua</u>	I have brought two fathers, two princes.
<u>Naijuuf nua, Amaf nua,</u>	Two princes, two fathers.
<u>Mitnoe lek-leok</u>	[To] sit together in the appropriate fashion.
<u>Mitkeet ok-oke'</u>	[To] stand together in a row.

Throughout this study, I have endeavoured to show how, for the Meto of Oecussi, matters of land and self are not easily divisible. Illness is addressed by inquiring into where the afflicted have been and what interaction they may have had with the spirits there. Likewise, calamities such as violent storms and droughts are generally attributed to human behaviour. The way Tua Kolo thanked Uis Bobo for coming provides us with some insight the nature of this blurring. While it is easy to understand how Uis Bobo belongs in the village of Bihala, Kolo's assurance that Boboloa is also his 'place' requires more explaining. This is because, rather than a location, Boboloa is an ancient hero who is said to have murdered a Catholic priest before being killed himself by the Portuguese. Seeking clarity as to what this meant ('How could a person be a place? It doesn't make sense!') I quizzed my informants on whether there was a location near Bihala named after the long-dead warrior, but they assured me there was not.

Such perspectives have challenged ethnographers of the region before me. In her work on water politics and spiritual ecology, Palmer (2015, 1) described the foothills of Timor's Mount Matebian as a 'supra-social landscape' 'created by

and still governed through complex interactions between spirits, humans, animals, and other physical objects and forces.’ Further east in Lautem, Pannell (2011, 222) recorded a similar outlook among the Fataluku people, for whom she said ‘quotidian encounters with non-human beings’ including ancestral and elemental spirits that are essentially inseparable’ from the way they work and live on the land. ‘Spirits’ wrote Allerton (2009, 276) of the Manggarai in Flores across the Savu sea ‘animate and merge with a material landscape of energies, effects, and practical consequences’. Kolo’s conflation then, might well be taken as example of not just a Meto, but a wider regional tendency to collapse geography and identity into a single spiritually mediated domain. The question of whether he was speaking about a person or place is simply not answerable or relevant in the system of logic he was using.

In light of this example, the emphasis placed by Meto ritual speech on doublets that express unity and wholeness becomes more comprehensible. Not only, Kolo assures Uis Bobo, has he come with ‘*two fathers, two princes – two fathers, two priests*’, a probable reference to Bobokase and Kutete, but he has brought them together in a way that would put everything in its rightful place,<sup>201</sup> and thus be pleasing to Uis Bobo, whose interest is in maintaining unity and order.

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<sup>201</sup> *Mikete* is a verb which means to ‘put in place’. The phrase *mikete lasi* (put away troubles), for example, means to resolve a dispute.

**Foit Seu!**

**Afi ho feefm aa 'naek ma**

**Haanm aa 'naek**

**Es mok Uis Bobo**

**Bae mone**

**Bae feto**

**Fetat noe ki ben**

**Ha'nat noe ki ben**

**Hi es amtite minaob**

**Cruz ii, kalis ii**

**Maut, tala neno fai**

**Fai neno**

**Toon antaam mpoi ntaam toon**

**Kruz ii nseka' ma**

**Pisin ka ma poilan**

**Nane, 'tui' ja loof ka n'EEK on**

**Atu ka n'EEK.**

**Foit Seu!**

In the past your mouth was great and.

your voice was great.

Together with Lord Bobo.

[His] male friends.

[His] female friends.

You spoke with one mouth.

With one voice.

You have advanced.

The cross, the chalice.

[And just as] day becomes night.

Night becomes day.

[Just as] the years come and go.

You have never discarded it.

Never flicked it away.

So too the way of the pencil will not stop.

[The way of the charcoal will not be closed.

While Uis Bobo, Uis Kutete and the *amaf nasi'* (old fathers) did not refer to any particular individual, Foit Seu is the name of an old man from Kutete who died in the mid-1990s and was well remembered by older members of the community. During his life he was the *mafefa'*, the spokesperson and deputy to Kutete's *naijuuf*, hence his 'great mouth'. Always, Kolo reminds us, he and Uis Bobo had spoken with 'one voice'.

Kolo's reason for evoking Foit Seu as an individual rather than referring to his line appears to be related to the role he is believed to have played in the introduction of Catholicism to the highlands. While Western sources on the history of Catholicism in West Timor confidently set out a chronology of colonial intervention and missionary effort,<sup>202</sup> this literature

<sup>202</sup> Hägerdal (2012) provides an account of colonial era Catholic/Meto contact, including the translation of many documents from the Portuguese and Dutch colonial archives.

only loosely corresponds with the accounts embedded in Meto oral lore. Though generally agreeing that Catholicism was brought to the island by the Portuguese, the status of the Church in the highlands remains rooted in Austronesian notions of precedence and the stories people tell of its origins are populated by local actors. Meto animism is the elder brother (*tataf*), the Church is its active but ever grateful *olif* (younger brother) – two distinct but integral parts of a whole. With a lack of detail typical of Meto ritual speech, Kolo remembered Foit Seu and his friend Uis Bobo as having been critical to this process, that they ‘advanced the cross’ as inevitably ‘as day becomes night and night becomes day’, to have ‘never discarded it’, or ‘flicked it away’. In the same way, he implied, unity between Kutete and Bobokase would make it possible for the people of the hills to take another foreign concept – ‘the way of the charcoal’, ‘the way of the stick’ (that is to say, modern education) and make it central to their lives.

Nane, es Uis Bobo

Mok ho bae feto

Mok ho baab le'u

Mok ho tobe nua sin

Mok ho ba'e na ok-oke'

Es bale Bihala

Neek mese' ale-lekot

Ansao mese' ale-lekot

Neno ii sium

Aklusit ini, akaels ini

Esan kaesn ini

Therefore, Lord Bobo.

Along with your female friends.

Along with your sister's older brothers.

Along with your two priests.

Along with all your friends.

You are Bihala.

[You are all] of one good mind.

[You are all] of good heart.

Today receive.

These scribblers, these diggers.

Who will work in the way of the foreigners.

Kolo's direct assertion that Lord Bobo and his line 'are Bihala' (*es Bihala*) is another good example of the tendency to not distinguish between person and place in *meto* thought. There

appears to be little or no distinction made between asking to be received by a person (*atoni*), ancestral spirit (*nitu*), a collectivity of ancestral spirits (*nitu sin*) or a place (*bale*). This categorical fluidity extends to the issue of what was being requested, something made manifest in what it was that Kolo hoped Uis Bobo would help the children achieve<sup>203</sup> – to ‘work in the way of the foreigners’. In this way, while most in Oecussi today are eager to access the riches of the outside world, and have started using money and access to state power as a yardstick of fortune, the *meto* (that which is customary/local/indigenous) continues to be essential. Clearly, the relationship between the two categories is of one of enablement rather than replacement. So long as *meto* standards for seeking permission and performing thanks are followed, becoming *kase* is okay. Though seemingly distinct at first, on closer examination the two categories become more difficult to separate.

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<sup>203</sup> Calling the children ‘diggers’ (*akaeli ini*) is a clear reference to their unearthing of knowledge.



<u>Tite li'aan' ini</u>	Push the children.
<u>Aan feto ma aan mone</u>	The girls and the boys.
<u>Nait sina 'tu'i ma</u>	So that their pencils and
<u>Sin atu kaisan ma'eek</u>	Charcoal not be held back.
<u>Aan honi', aan tao</u>	The birth children, the adopted children.
<u>A'oe-tenes loof es hit</u>	You are cooling them.
<u>Ahainikit loof es hit</u>	You are making them fresh.
<u>Feel aa suul alekot, aut alekot</u>	You give them good letters, good charcoal.
<u>Sulat es nai</u>	Paper is there.
<u>Posta es nai</u>	Posts [with the government] are there.
<u>Hala n'auba ha, kuan anhaekn aha</u>	[May the] <i>hala</i> be smooth, the <i>kuan</i> stand.
<u>Eun naheun ha</u>	May the <i>enu</i> be full.
<u>Upein he tkiso te uhiin</u>	[so] I see and know [what you are saying].

In this section, Kolo referred to two *meto* methods for understanding and interacting with the world of the spirits – the act of spiritual cooling (*hainiik*) and [pig] liver divination<sup>204</sup> (*tail lilo*).

The idea that places and people can be harmed by spiritual heat and need to be cooled is ubiquitous in Oecussi, and throughout the region more generally. Visitors to Oecussi quickly notice how most houses have a fencepost out the front that is capped with a coconut shell. These are left behind after coconut water (mixed with a few drops of blood from a sacrificial pig) is ceremonially poured over it as a way of removing dangerous spiritual heat when new residents are

<sup>204</sup> Augury in West Timor is practised with a variety of animals. Due to their expense, cattle are usually sacrificed only at wedding feasts and for the opening of sacred houses. The preferred sacrificial animal is usually a pig, although goats and chickens can be used. There is little detailed research on liver divination in the region except for Hoskins' classic 1993 paper, 'Violence, Sacrifice and Divination: Giving and Taking Life in Eastern Indonesia'.

moving in or recovering from some kind of trouble. While the problems caused by 'heat' (*maputu*) usually manifest through illness, they can take any form, including poor exam results. While there are some renowned individuals who seem to be able to do this without ritual aids (Maun Dan was one; he described his healing technique as 'pulling heat') for the most part the inherent ability to cool is the preserve of legendary figures such as Uis Bobo.

When Kolo requested that 'the *hala*' be smooth, the *kuan* be upright, and the *enu*' be full he was not speaking metaphorically. These words all referred to parts of the liver of the sacrificial pig which he would examine after he had finished speaking so that, as he put it, 'I see and know what you [Uis Bobo] are saying'. The *hala*' (platform, or bed) is the broad flat surface of the liver. Any divots or imperfections in its surface may indicate that there are tough times ahead. The *kuan* (hamlet/village) is a small flap of flesh found on the side of *hala*'. Ideally it should 'stand up'; doing so signals the ability of those speaking to the spirit to withstand any difficulties that might come their way. *Enu*' means gallbladder. A plump one indicates that times of plenty are on the way. An empty one warns of scarcity.

The process of interpreting these signs is highly subjective, and indeed at many ceremonies the ritual speaker will just glance quickly at the organ before confirming that all is good. I attended at least a dozen animal sacrifices large and small, and never saw one that ended badly. There were stories to the effect that before the war of 1999 there had been a spate of sacrificial pigs with obviously diseased livers – something that most of my informants took to be hard evidence that liver divination is an accurate way of telling the future, and that

most outsiders saw as proving that Meto divination simply reflects the concerns and priorities of the person examining the liver.

In Oecussi, schooling still tended to be understood by many as a process through which their children might become *matenek* (T: smart) and eventually secure a government post. The lowlands (which Kolo simply refers to as being *es nai*, ‘there’) are understood as a place of ‘good paper’ and ‘good posts’. This attitude appears to be a lingering effect of the situation that prevailed during colonial times when the tiny minority of boys who were educated were then conscripted into the army and afterwards had real value to the colonial regime as administrators, teachers, and go-betweens (Joseph 2014, 60). The realization that students graduating today are unlikely to find steady work, let alone an ongoing government post, has not yet made its way to the mountains.

Na lo tebes ki .....	Truly, you (Boboloa and Kutete).
Naijuuf nua ki .....	Are the two princes.
Mok aamf ini ok-oke' .....	Together with all the fathers.
Ama tobe ok-oke' .....	All the priests.
Fee hi ansaom ini teem leen .....	Give you seat of affections without reserve.
Hi amnesat es nai .....	Your lowlands are there and
Posta es nai .....	Your posts are there.
Gaspar es nai .....	Gaspar <sup>205</sup> is there.
In naneta .....	He sets down.
Nii nopo Uis Neno, paku Uis Neno .....	God's torch, God's lamp.
Sikau es naiti 'baa' molo' ka .....	If someone brings cursed yellow roots or
'Baa' metan .....	Cursed black roots.
Apao ma n'eeK .....	[You will] stop them.
Loof hi es mi'aiba pasib .....	You will push them away.

The Meto word *ansao* has no equivalent in English. Fox (2016, 414) translates it as meaning lung/liver, although the sense in which it is used is closer to that usually connoted by the word 'heart'. Regardless of the word's meaning, the idea Kolo is expressing is clear enough – that through the wholehearted embrace of Boboloa and Kutete, the children will find success (that is to say, government office jobs) in the lowlands.

Gaspar here refers to Father Richard, a Meto rendering of his last name, Daschbach. His status in Kutete is complicated – though a foreigner, the foreign thing he is associated with, Catholicism, has become part of the village's daily life and thought, and what was once a *kase* faith is now understood through local frameworks of precedence and legend. To Kolo he is 'God's torch, God's lamp', and the light he casts offers protection from that most Meto of all threats, the cursed black

roots, and the cursed yellow roots.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> From my very first days living in Oecussi in 2011, I had heard tales of Father Richard Daschbach, known to the Meto as Amu Gaspar. An American priest with Indonesian citizenship, he had been in Timor since the mid-1960s and was regarded across the island as a living saint. In particular his exploits during the war of 1999, during which he helped organize armed resistance to pro-Indonesian militia were the stuff of legend. Aside from his status as a war hero, almost uniquely in Oecussi's 500-year-long encounter with foreign missionaries, Richard had embraced the lifestyle and language of West Timor's mountains where he lived and ran a shelter home called Topu Honis (*topu* is a verb which means to lead a person or animal by the hand, *honis* means life). There, in a clean and well-organized compound of dormitories and kitchens, all-comers could find food and shelter and a family-like environment. Its residents were mostly unwanted children or highland women fleeing violence, but Richard liked to say that 'everyone is welcome at Topu Honis', and people would come from all over the world to spend time with him and understand his project. As the decades passed, the village of Kutete came to accept him as one of their own, and he added to his Catholic rites the Meto veneration of ancestral spirits, which he equated with the Catholic practice of seeking intercession from the saints. Many foreigners, including myself, were charmed by his hospitality, his seeming kindness and his deep knowledge of the Meto people and language (indeed he was one of several people who helped translate this ritual speech). Timorese, who usually referred to him as Amu Gaspar (Amu being an honorific for a holy man, Gaspar being a Meto rendering of his surname) would seek his prayers, which were believed to be miraculous, and his advice, which came free of judgement and was known to be very sensible indeed.

In 2018, as I was working on this book, I was shocked and heartbroken to hear that Richard had been accused of having committed acts of paedophilia against the children under his care and had been stripped of his priesthood by the Catholic Church. While many in Oecussi seem unable to believe that a man they regarded as 'God's lamp' is guilty of such crimes and that he has been cursed or 'sold' (T: *fa'an*, betrayed), from a foreigner's point of view, the allegations are impossible to dismiss. In May 2019, he was taken away by the Timor-Leste police and is currently thought to be being held for questioning outside Oecussi.

Like many eastern Indonesian societies (Forth 1993), the Meto tend to be concerned with the possibility that enemies might attack them by supernatural means. This tendency seems particularly marked among the Meto, to the extent that the missionary/anthropologist Middelkoop (1960), who spent his career in West Timor, made it the focus of the doctoral thesis he wrote upon his retirement to the Netherlands. The way it was explained to me was that a curse (*bunuk*) was usually revealed through a wise person (*ahinet*) being called in to divine the cause of an illness or other inexplicable disaster. Cursing an enemy was said involve leaving a hexed object in front of their house or along a path they walk along regularly. These objects were held to come in two forms. One, *kafeti*, was made from the bones of a specially sacrificed chicken bound together with rocks or sticks taken from a place known for its spiritual heat. The other, referred to by Tua Kolo,<sup>206</sup> was called ‘*ba’an*’, yellow or black roots. Despite trying to find out their botanical origins, exactly where these roots came from remained a mystery to me. People seemed loath to admit knowing too much about such things lest I think they themselves had been using them. All informants were willing to say is that they were dug up in the forest and that, unlike *kafeti*, which at least might be visible to someone with sharp eyes, they were near impossible to spot. What Kolo calls ‘God’s light’, and the protection of powerful ancestors, were the only way to defend against them. Thus, while an outsider such as me would see the problems of Nando Soba’s

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<sup>206</sup>He uses ‘*baa*’, the metathesized form of the word. Nouns modified by an adjective (here *molo* ‘yellow’ and *metan* ‘black’) regularly occur in the metathesized form (Edwards, 2016).’

school as largely due to the teachers not coming to work, from Kolo's perspective the misfortune and failure stemmed from the *meto*, and should be addressed as such. Although he had no way of knowing the specific nature of the challenges the exams presented to Nando Soba's children, he also had no reason not to believe that, with the help of Uis Bobo, Uis Kutete and Gaspar's light of God, they would not overcome them.

Kalun fee ka la kau li'aan loel alekot

He naika nsae

Naika npoi nfiin

He ka ttiit mese' he nsaun

Sin kulu 'naek es Nando Soba

Ije usan Bihala

In kanan kulu 'naek

Noof nain in a'liif ma 'ne'uf

Es in kulu aan' ini

Naat fee'k ini nmonin

Neek ini n'aikan

Give the children good brains.

That will go up.

That will go on to the end.

We don't see one who will go down.

Their great teacher is Nando Soba.

He is the navel of Bihala.

His name is the great teacher.

His left and his right hands.

Are the little teachers.

[Their] mouths are lively.

Their seat of affections are sharp.

The term Kolo used to refer to Nando Soba, 'great teacher' (*kulu 'naek*) sounds overblown in Meto as well as English. Laban, my *kaes metan* friend who helped translate part of this *uab natoni*, found it particularly hilarious, and from that point on, when he was out of earshot, rarely referred to Nando in any other way. Nonetheless, his language was consistent with the form and the purpose of what had come before – a way of situating the exams within a *meto* framework and thereby imparting a sense of order and confidence in the face of increasingly confusing outside reality. Nando Soba was the 'great teacher' and 'the navel of Bihala', and the other teachers were like his 'left and right hands'. In reality, as

discussed above, he was quite hapless – his ability to run an effective school stymied by confused education policy,<sup>207</sup> a remote location and a lack of funds. Kolo said that with the help of Uis Bobo and Uis Kutete ‘we cannot see one [child] that will go down’ but Laban regularly lamented to me that some students in his Year 6 class, despite having attended classes for half their lives, were still unable to read. Nando did what he could to run an effective school, but with his options limited, the *meto* was a way of finding hope in a situation that might have otherwise seemed beyond it.

Au ka 'tanhai ko fa

Mes ije nfai jen

Lofa 'tama nfiin nmeu noka'

Au utaam hit aluk ama

Au utaam lai puah

I won't neglect you.

But it's getting late.

Tomorrow morning I will enter.

I will give you the betel purse.

I will give betel [to chew together].

Although the plan had been for everyone to arrive at Been Masu during daylight hours, the remote hills of Oecussi with their unpredictable weather, ruined roads and lack of electricity (meaning that even those with mobile phones often can't use them) are a difficult place to be punctual. While being perceived as neglectful by the ancestors can be disastrous, towards the end of his recital, Kolo had to contend with 30 yawning children who needed to get up early the next morning for their exams. Normally *uab natoini* such as this would end with the distribution and chewing of betel, with a portion being placed on the sacred rock for the spirits to

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<sup>207</sup> See Shah and Quinn (2014).



share, but on this occasion it was simply not possible. *Meto* ritual is conversational, and while the demands of the dead can be considerable, they are balanced by the needs and the limitations of the living. Protocols for paying homage to the spirits are clear, but if there really isn't time to talk more, or money is too short for a pig, an explanation can be made and apologies begged. While, to paraphrase Grenfell writing on Timorese culture more generally (2012, 86), 'the spirit world continues to reverberate on the fortunes of the living', Kolo's promise to share betel with Uis Bobo the next day point throws the ultimately dynamic nature of this reverberation into relief. An example of how, like most *Meto* rituals, his *uab natoni* was largely concerned with the extension of sociality from the living to the dead. The difference is that what was once a relationship with another mortal subject to the trials of life on earth, was now one with a spirit that may be thought of as both place and person and that, in ways which are mysterious though rarely doubted, has the ability to alter fortunes and provide security in an increasingly uncertain and confusing world.

## Conclusion

I end this chapter as I began it, with a quote from Michael Jackson (2005) based on his fieldwork in Sierra Leone.

'By affording us opportunities to replay or anticipate real events through objects, words, and images that stand for those events', we achieve 'a sense of being able to vicariously act on a world that is, in reality, refractory to our will and outside our control' (85).

It would be a mistake to simply associate the persistence of

*meto* thinking with an adherence to customary ways of life, or even as being oppositional to internationally connected modernity. While the widespread rejection of new agricultural techniques in Kutete might seem, at first glance, to signal a preference for *meto* spirituality over *kase* science, on closer examination it seems that what is being resisted is not modernity itself, but the relinquishing of control and understanding that go along with this particular aspect of it. While the people of Kutete, and highland Oecussi more generally, have a demonstrable appreciation for many foreign things and ways, they are not willing to adopt them if the cost of doing this is their capacity to act on and understand the world through their own terms. While this is no doubt frustrating for outside actors who, usually with the best of intentions, would like to change their agricultural practice or any other aspect of their lives, they might take solace their ideas are not being rejected out of xenophobia, but because people there have not yet been able (or willing) to assimilate them into their remarkably persistent and dynamic ontological system. Especially given that the central component of this system among the *Meto* is ongoing conversation/negotiation between the living and the dead, there is no reason to think that this will not change at some stage in the near future. 'Tradition' in Oecussi is adaptable, and in this there is hope.

The idea that foreign technologies and modes of living in Kutete are taken up or passed over by virtue of how they are integrated into a *meto* understanding of the world is also supported by my exegesis of Tua Kolo's ritual speech.

In Chapter 4 of this study I drew from Scott (1998, 2) to speak about how lowland Oecussi is being remade to be 'legible' to foreign investors. Kolo's *uab natoni* can be seen as an

interesting parallel to this, elaborately rendering the *kase* task of school exams comprehensible to the *meto* spirit of Uis Bobo, and in doing so securing his amorphous yet indispensable support. Kolo's work then is an example of the encompassing and flexible nature of ritual in highland Oecussi; in this case taking a concept/institution that until recently was completely alien to the village and making it meaningful – effectively empowering the younger generation to go forth in the world without alienating or showing a lack of gratitude to their elders whose minds and bodies will always remain in the *nu'af* (hills). Although, as Laban pointed out, from an outside point of view the 'great teacher' Nando Soba would have been better putting resources into ensuring the junior teachers turned up to work and planned effective lessons, in an independent Timorese state where education has previously been a tool of colonial control, there is a compelling case for allowing education to be framed in a way that is meaningful to both teachers and students, even if that means accepting practices not aligned with more broadly understood notions of reality.

The maintenance of things *meto*, then, entails the preservation through ritual practice of a sense of control over an ever more confusing and insistent outside world. Although the spirits can be harsh task masters, willing to severely punish those who fail to recognize and pay tribute to the old hierarchies, it should not be forgotten that they are still of the village (if not inseparable from the village itself) and want their descendants to live free from hunger and anxiety. Rather than being any sort of barrier to progress, then, nested in this dynamism, in the inherently conversational nature of spiritual thought and practice in Oecussi, is the potential for the emergence of lifeworlds that are neither *kase* nor *meto*, but

defined by ongoing movement between them. It is through such emergent, hybridized ways of being that the Meto of 2015 are able to aspire to global futures without forsaking the security and power embedded in their ongoing connection with the ancestors who still dwell in their highland *uem le'u*.

## Concluding thoughts: encounter, change, experience

Up in the hills of Oecussi, one of the more popular rumours doing the rounds about my presence was that I was there to steal the wealth of the land. Some said I was after gold, others that I was scouting for oil, but Laban, my schoolteacher friend who seemed to get an almost unreasonable amount of delight from passing on what Kutete was saying behind my back, said that many thought I was there to steal words and rituals and sacred narratives. As discussed throughout this book, for most of those with whom I worked, success in the *kase* realm was obtained and maintained by being in good standing with the ancestral spirits of the *meto* one, and for that reason, to their way of thinking, the means of interacting it were well worth stealing. Given that plunder had always been the island's main draw for foreigners (its sandalwood trees lathed into fragrant smelling wardrobes, its people sold

as slaves in the markets of Makassar and Java) it was easy to see how my claim to be breaking half a millennia worth of precedent in travelling there for strictly selfless purposes was regarded with scepticism. This was reinforced by the categorical fluidity that I found characterized Meto thought – the occasional difficulty of distinguishing clearly between person, object, and place. Yes, my activities mostly involved jotting down words in a notebook, but for my informants those words could be the making or ruin of a person, village, or family. While I have taken care not to include explicitly secret knowledge, the reality remains that like the colonialists who came before me, in this book I too have taken from the *pah meto* (dry land – West Timor) what I have needed for my own purposes. Given this, I have often wondered whether the suspicions harboured by the people of Kutete about my motivations were not closer to the truth than they seemed at first. At the very least such a situation demanded not just sensitivity, but a well-considered theoretical response.

In the introduction to this book I divided the theoretical frameworks I have used into three categories: encounter, change, and experience. Now, at the beginning of its conclusion, and in light of the above observation, it seems appropriate to briefly comment on how this triad came to serve as a way of managing the tension inherent in using profoundly local words and stories whose telling and interpretation was generally considered the prerogative of their *tuan* (masters), to speak to broader discourses within anthropology and beyond. To reiterate a point made throughout this book, the Meto are a people whose world had once been defined by their ability to insist that contact with outsiders take place on their own terms. In the decades after 1945, the increasing capacity of the state

to enforce its rule in the mountains and the perceived ease of life in the lowlands led to this autonomy being reduced, and instigated a period of profound and continuing social change that continues to this day. Insofar as this is a process that Meto are experiencing along with many other upland people throughout Southeast Asia, the comparative lens of Scott's Zomia hypothesis has been a useful one through which to view it. At the same time (as each of the preceding chapters has shown), while the new ways of being that were emerging in Oecussi are generally affiliated with putative universals such as democracy, economic development, and Catholicism, quotidian practice remains contingent on their sometimes heated interaction with local perspectives. In that this too is a trend not restricted to the Meto but observable throughout once-isolated parts of Southeast Asia, Tsing's (2005) *Friction* has proved an appropriate way of considering its broader implications.

Despite their utility for considering Meto life in comparative regional and global contexts, I found that theoretical perspectives focusing on encounter and change were of limited use in approaching the subjective experiences of those with whom I worked. While theories of contact and change offered by Tsing (2005) and Scott (2009) did offer ways of understanding Oecussi, the key challenge of this study has stemmed from my awareness that the Meto had their own explanations for what was happening, albeit ones based upon an experience I could only observe as an outsider. My efforts, inspired by the examples of Jackson (2013a, 2013b) and Geertz (1995), in trying to address dilemma with closely written, personally infected prose, have lent this book its character and attempted to do justice to the complex and only partially understood

reality of my subjects.

The challenges I encountered in following this path were many. When I began my fieldwork in 2014, outsiders were an unusual sight in Oecussi, and one difficulty I encountered was that people sometimes simply got a shock when they saw me. While my pale skin didn't help me to blend in, it was the way I lived that really stood out – with my old scooter, interest in the Saturday afternoon cockfight and persistent attempts to speak Meto, even by the strange standards of foreigners no one had ever met anyone quite like me. And while most adjusted quickly, there remained a tendency to receive me as either a VIP, or an alien.

'Be good or whitey will kill you' (*kaes muti' fei luul ko*) I would sometimes hear mothers scold their children as I passed by at the market, although on one occasion at a neighbourhood gathering, I was asked to bless the assembled youngsters, so opinions clearly varied.

Jake's grandmother, Avo Marta, was always a pleasure to talk to because she had few such misconceptions. During her stay at Oecussi's convent school in the 1950s she had a chance to observe closely the domestic dramas of Portuguese nuns, something that had left her well aware that most foreigners were neither holy nor murderous. And while there were many places in Oecussi where I was regarded with wariness or unwarranted respect, her household was not one of them. There I was just a family friend, welcome to sit and drink coffee and valued as a fresh pair of ears for their stories of life in Mahata.

They had a few favourites – tales that always made them hoot and clap their hands with mirth. Once, aged about eight, Jake had made off with his uncle's boots and was using them to



stamp around in the mud when his high jinks were interrupted, in quick succession, by a clip over the ear from Marta then a sting from a scorpion hiding inside. On another occasion, when returning to the enclave in early 2000 after a few months in a West Timorese refugee camp, an Australian soldier on the border had asked Jake what the two chickens he was carrying were named (I: *siapa nama ayam-ayam kamu?*) causing him to run tearfully to his mother and report that *kaes muti* was trying to steal his birds.

It took about six months for stories about me to start appearing. There was the time I had fallen to sleep on the beach and had woken up with a wave crashing over my feet and my sandals presumably well on their way to Flores. Or maybe a mischievous crocodile had stolen them? They found the possibility hilarious. Or how I had surprised everyone by saying (in my best Meto) that I wasn't scared of *pah tuaf* (malevolent land spirit) because I'd met one – his name was Jake and he was studying geology in Dili. In response to their teasing (teasing may be Timor-Leste's national sport) about all the women I had supposedly danced with at a reception for a visiting clerical big shot, I told them I had 'caroused' only with the bishop (T: *dansa, dansa ho amu bispu*) – an image that had them laughing so loud that Tua Koa wandered over to see what was happening. The familiarity and easy humour with which Avo Marta and her family received me was a relief, and her willingness to knead into her answers to my ethnographic questions robust comment on how slow I was to understand and how little I really knew was a welcome and necessary reality check.

'*Ei pah,*' Marta would quip wryly to anyone around after a particularly egregious lack of comprehension, assuming that

I wouldn't understand (we usually conversed in Tetun), '*kaes' muti' msat nmoon*' (Whitey is stupid too).

Marta understood that as a short-term visitor, my knowledge of life in Oecussi and the experience of its people was partial and limited, and I mention her clear-eyed observation that *kaes muti'* was indeed at least as stupid as anyone else (more when it came to understanding *meto* words and ways) as a means of acknowledging that. In keeping with my own limitations, and out of respect for *meto* truths that should not be discussed glibly, in this study I have worked to present not a description of a system as a whole, but a series of experiences glimpsed, sketched, and analysed. Through this research, at once rooted in the local and of wider import to a changing world, I have aimed to illuminate how shifting patterns of interaction between the globalized realm of the *kase* and the personal and affective domain of the *meto* give form to life in Oecussi today.

Especially outside the academy, the nature of this study sometimes proved difficult to explain. During the long process of writing I sat on a panel at a conference in which I questioned the need for the construction of a highway through Oecussi. The project, part of a larger plan known as ZEESM discussed at length in Chapter 4, entailed the destruction of hundreds of homes and gardens, and Marta's was one of those in the path of the bulldozers. For her and her family the garden was a source of food, medicine, and shade, as well as space where the kids could safely play and visitors could be entertained. Losing it would have a devastating effect on their comfort and quality of life. The photo I used to illustrate the situation was calculated to cause a stir, an image of an expectant mother looking on as a giant mechanical digger wrecked the yard next

to her house – graphic enough that members of the audience gasped and tutted with dismay when I brought it up on the screen. The ZEESM spokesperson seemed irritated enough that he actually took out his mobile phone and proceeded to loudly speak on it throughout the whole presentation.



Afterwards I found myself the subject of some heartfelt criticism. ‘People like you,’ I was informed, ‘want Oecussi to stay in the past.’ The point I tried to make in response is that my concern was not so much with the way Oecussi had been, let alone preserving it, but how its history, identity and language were shaping its present and future. Those who are serious about respectfully working in the enclave need to understand that to ignore or simply pay lip service to this reality is to deny the continuing distinctiveness and autonomy of its people.

## An animating interior: the *meto* and economic development

In the past 40 years, life in Oecussi has changed profoundly. Until 1975 most of its people lived in highland villages, spoke only *Meto*, and had little use for money. Now with every year that passes, more and more people move to the urbanized lowlands, and even those whose lives remain dominated by customary ways understand that those of their children will not. While Oecussi's highlanders were once able to divide the world neatly into two distinct categories – the *meto* and the *kase*, now things are less clear. Throughout this study, I have attempted to show how, for them, daily practice emerges from the interplay between these formerly separate domains. The good things of the outside world are pursued not through rejecting the *meto* ways of the village, or collapsing them into the *kase*, but through the ritually mediated and repeated negotiation of travel between them – something which, taking inspiration from Jackson's writing on the creative in-between he calls a *limitrophe* (2015, 6), and the philosophical fiction of Timorese novelist Luis Cardoso (2002), I have described as a process of 'crossing'. In this way, the people of Oecussi are often able to identify, in the struggles of lowland life, the comforting presence of familiar highland spirits.

In the first chapter of this book I made the argument that until recent decades highland Oecussi was, to use Scott's term, a quintessential 'state-repelling space' (2009, 6–7). Its mountains were largely roadless and its sandalwood finite and difficult to extract. From their hilltop villages its people answered (in a complex, unwritten language) to their own princes (*naijuuf*) and priests (*tobe*), and were more than

capable of physically resisting those who would have them do otherwise. In the past, as now, the idea that wandering strangers who wish to enter the land must ask permission (*toit licensa*) of its rightful guardians (*pah in tuan*) was key to Meto socio-spiritual life, and while it was from the outside world that they received such things as guns, maize and horses that transformed their way of life, until recently the highland *suko* of Oecussi were generally in a position to demand that contact occurred on their terms. Before the imposition of intensive Indonesian rule, and despite the tribute its people had provided to the Portuguese-endorsed king on the coast, the mountains were rarely accessible to outsiders – an unmapped network of sacred sites, hamlets, foot-tracks and forests layered with spirits and stories knowable only through Meto words and the generational experience of village life.

This book owes a critical debt to the handful of scholars who have worked to understand and chronicle this distinctive socio-political order. Schulte Nordholt's masterful *The Political System of the Atoni of Timor* (1971) remains the most extensive description of how most Meto lived up until the Second World War. McWilliam's (2002) *Paths of Origin, Gates of Life* uses the skillful analysis of Meto sacred speech to provide a unique insight into the history of a West Timorese domain. Meitzner Yoder's PhD book (2005) on the enclave's spiritually mediated land management practices is perhaps closest to this study in that it focuses, in part, on highland/lowland contact in Oecussi and the social and ecological changes this spurred in the early 2000s, although it too is marked by a concern with historical knowledge. The nature of the Meto politics described by these scholars, like those found throughout the expanse of upland Southeast Asia that Scott

calls Zomia (2009), was defined by their ability to manage and limit interaction with sometimes exploitative lowland states. As 'distance demolishing-technologies' (45) and assertively inclusive postcolonial nationalisms have eroded this autonomy, the question of 'what's next' has become an increasingly compelling one.

Since the departure of the Republic of Indonesia from Oecussi in 1999, the descendants of Meto highlanders who once resisted the projection of *kase* authority from the lowlands have come to dominate central governance in Pante Makassar. While proudly and profitably affiliating with the ostensibly universal logics of nationalism and development authorized by Dili they have, at the same time, often used elements of the power they've gained through this affiliation to replicate socio-spiritual networks and hierarchies of precedence comprehensible only through reference to an older, *meto* order of highland domains. The clans that once dominated life in the mountains continue to dominate life in the town. More broadly, urban fortunes, including matters of health, money, and employment, are still widely understood through *meto* frameworks rooted in affective experience and the sacred geography of the hills. Thus, even as the *meto* becomes less relevant (even invisible) as a way of overtly organizing economic and political life (the *tobe* no longer legally has the right to regulate land use, most villages have been moved to the roads, and knowledge of ritual speech is not being passed on to the young ...), as an animating interior that explains fortune and orders sociality its influence remains strong.

The occasional attempt to plead otherwise notwithstanding, post-independence governments in Timor-Leste, like their colonial predecessors, have usually equated 'progress' with

economic growth and urbanization. For all its problematic aspects, this idea is generally accepted among the nation's young who, when asked about their dreams, invariably express their preference for an urbanized future that they believe that this sort of development will make a sure thing. For this reason, while, for example, ZEESM's acquisition of land in the enclave was physically and spiritually disruptive once it got underway, the vision behind it proved an easy sell, with many people telling me that they were excited to hear from its leader, Mari Alkatiri, that their sleepy home would soon become 'like Singapore'. For those with any education, exchanging the sometimes boring, insecure life of a highland farmer for that of an office worker in the bustling (I: *rame*) town is a nearly universal (if unattainable) aspiration. What this study shows is that even as people wholeheartedly embrace a globalized future, distinctly *meto* patterns of sociality and ritual continue to be important. Though receding from visibility in contrast with the bright lights of globalized modernity, in Oecussi the *meto* remains an indispensable, interior means of securing a happy and prosperous future.

Seeming like a state

Although Oecussi today is physically accessible to a degree it never has been before, in many ways understanding life there is more confusing than it would have been 80 years ago. In 1937, the idea that conditions in the enclave could be considered without reference to *Meto* ritual or socio-political practice would have bordered on the absurd – except at the most abstract level there was simply no other frame for describing the prevailing socio-spiritual order. While it is true that the Portuguese never acquired such knowledge, with the possible exception of a brief period of slightly more

intensive rule in the 1960s and early 1970s, nor did they usually seek to directly influence life in the highlands. By contrast, in 2017, outsiders working for the government or international NGOs would often fly into Pante Makassar on short-term assignments tasked with devising or managing elaborate interventions in Meto life with no knowledge of local ways, seemingly regarding them, as did my interlocutor at the conference, as an archaic curiosity – something that might perhaps be nodded to as ‘cultural heritage’, but not considered practically important in modern life. To be sure Oecussi today is an integral part of Timor-Leste and can be navigated using maps, roads, and the national language. What is hidden, however, behind the edifice of post-independence bureaucratic and physical infrastructure, is how the quotidian and seemingly universalized life of this state is shaped by local conditions – globalized ideas energized and in a sense transformed by their frictive interaction with deeply felt socio-spiritual imperatives.

For those unaware such imperatives exist, or perhaps reluctant to accept the continuing relevance of indigenous ways to contemporary life, the resulting practice may be read as dysfunction, if not corruption or incompetence. Markus Sulu using UN funds to maintain his clan’s longstanding and profoundly non-egalitarian political dominance. Jose Cunha, the reluctant *usi*, who is sad that his subjects are hunting deer but is still determined to protect them from the wrath of the state’s law. Nando Soba expressing his determination to usher in a prosperous new age of globalization not by insisting his teachers turn up to work, but by raising funds for a sacrificial pig and someone to read the omens in its liver. In these incidents, an outsider could see little but a corrupt official,



environmental laws unenforced, and a mismanaged school. By showing how they fit within *meto* frameworks, I aim to suggest that such totalizing judgements are unlikely to be helpful in understanding or addressing what is really happening – and that more serious engagement with and genuine openness to local perspectives might well facilitate solutions based on the way things are, rather than the way foreigners imagine they should be.

In the specific case of Oecussi, the seeming dysfunction of the state and its servants appears to act, at least some of the time, as a way of maintaining the status of *meto* ways not necessarily aligned with internationally accepted norms. As a mode of resistance that allows indigenous people to gain from their association with powerful outside ideas and institutions without fully committing to the norms encoded within, and with compliments to James Scott (1998), we might characterize this dynamic as ‘seeming like a state’, a situation where the apparatus of *kase* power appears to be present, but on closer examination manifests logics of behaviour, being, and authority lodged in the *meto*. Although in Oecussi today, ideas and institutions that have been imported from elsewhere seem to be dominant, at second glance the way they actually operate is often contingent on underlying *meto* frameworks of life and power. Any consideration of life in the district that does not take this into account is bound to end in misunderstanding.

Lives in motion: the *meto* as movement in a global age

Significantly, throughout this study I found little evidence to suggest that *kase* or *meto*, as they are experienced today, are ever really mutually exclusive. Although from the pulpit of the

church in Pante Makassar priests would sometimes preach against the sacrifice of animals and divination, such views were politely tolerated and almost completely ignored by the congregation – in most villages even the local catechist would participate in *adat* ceremonies. Nor could I find, although I looked, anyone who had rejected Catholicism in favour of the pre-Catholic *Meto* observance – indeed when I asked about it people seemed confused; they couldn't imagine how the two could be anything but complementary.

Although highland and lowland life continues to be distinct, the large-scale settlement of highlanders (*atoin nu'af*) in coastal areas where government control and the cash economy are strong has led to the emergence of new forms of interaction between them, with the work of 'crossing' between the two realms becoming important in personal and group identities, and often also in day-to-day life. 'Everything we have,' Carlos Sulu told me often, 'is because we never forgot our identity.' This conceptual and physical space between the highland village and the lowland town has become a site of reflexive encounter and adaption, where ambitions relating to success in the outside world may be pursued through social and spiritual frameworks that look to the sacred landscape of the hills. This pattern is congruent with the broad importance of precedence and outward-inward pairings in eastern Indonesian socio-political thinking. The *meto* has come to be experienced as a geographically embedded, inwardly felt, ritually accessible spiritual power that, though largely invisible to outsiders, is believed to be behind almost anything that happens, and can be harnessed for help in matters large and small. For the relocated highlanders of Oecussi, *meto* ritual can be a mode of both sense-making and action in an ever more confusing and

cosmopolitan world.

In Oecussi today, then, the *kase* is not a replacement for the *meto* but rather a favourable condition that cannot be obtained or maintained without it. In a way that is rarely visible or obvious to outsiders, it is central to how people frame and pursue their aspirations to success and recognition in a globalized world. Becoming *kase*, in the sense of liberating oneself from the uncertainties and hardships of highland subsistence agriculture, is seen as a laudable goal. The critical thing, it seems, is following the correct procedure for getting there, of never forgetting that a life lived well is one marked by movement and remembering – crossing between the hills and the town, between the realms of the living and the dead, between *kase* and *meto*.

## Selected Glossary

*adat* Indonesian: traditional ritual

*ane* rice

*aen meto'* dry (rain watered) rice

*aen oek* wet rice

*ahinet* wise person/diviner

*amaf* father

*ana'* small

*atoni* man

*benas* machete

*betis* sarong

*bibi* goat

*bijael* cow

*bijae kase* horse

*enaf* mother

*eno'* gate/door

*fatu* rock

*fui* wild

*fungtionariu* Tetun: public servant

*hau* tree

*hau mone* (also called *nii mone*) male tree (sacrificial altar)

*ika'* fish

- kaes muti*' white foreigner  
*kanaf* clan  
*kase* foreign  
*kuan* hamlet  
*lalan* path  
*Lalehan* Tetun: heaven  
*le'u* sacred  
*alekot/naleok* good  
*lele* swidden garden  
*loit* money  
*loit muti*' white money (sacred coins)  
*lulik* Tetun: sacred  
*mainikin* cold  
*malae* Tetun: white foreigner  
*malo* medicine  
*maputu*' hot  
*meob* warrior/cat  
*meto* indigenous/dry  
*'naek* large/great  
*naijuuf* prince (leader of a *suko*)  
*nasi* forest  
*nii enaf* mother pole (central pole of sacred house)  
*nitu* ancestral spirit  
*nonot* ritually appropriate behaviour  
*nu'af* mountain  
*nuni* taboo (usually food)  
*pah* land  
*pah tuaf* land spirit  
*pegawai* Indonesian: public servant  
*pena*' corn  
*puah* betel nut

*seimu* land parcel

*sis* meat

*sonaf* palace

*suko* village

*tail lilo* liver divination

*tasi* sea

*tobe* animist priest

*tua sabu* palm liquor

*uab* language

*uab natoni* ritual language

*uem le'u* sacred house

*ume* house

*usif, usi'* king, highness (honorific)

*xefe* Tetun: boss

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*photo by Rui Pinto*

## About the Author

Dr Michael Rose is a research fellow at the Australian National University's College of Asia and the Pacific. He is an anthropologist and author with a passion for narrative ethnography and a varied, even colourful, background working jobs in policy, agriculture, international development and education throughout Eurasia and Australia.

The author can be contracted at [michael.rose@anu.edu.au](mailto:michael.rose@anu.edu.au)

