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The Not-So-Wild West

As we were landing in Kupang, I noticed that something was strange on this side of the island. At first, I couldn't put my finger on the difference. Later I realised it was the sheer orderliness of the place. The straight lines, neat rows of houses and relative civic order were completely unlike what I was used to by now in Timor-Leste. On our descent into El Tari International Airport, I had glimpsed an area outside town with rows of encampment-style housing. Was that where the East Timorese had lived, I wondered? I tried to remember the names and locations of the camps in Kupang where thousands of East Timorese forced to flee East Timor in 1999 had been relocated by the Indonesian army.

Kupang, not unlike Dili, was a ramshackle, hot and dusty 'Wild West'-styled trading port. A relic of the Dutch era, it is located at the western tip of island Timor. Despite its involvement in periodic local resource booms (manganese mining being the most recent), it still found itself the capital of one of Indonesia's poorest provinces, Nusa Tenggara Timur. For us, Kupang was also a convenient starting point for our plans to participate in a traditional honey harvest ceremony, a highly orchestrated event that would take place in the border regions in the middle of the island. A friend from there, Agus, was picking us up at the airport.

At the time of my first visit in 2011, my academic colleague (and Agus's brother) Balthasar and I had been researching Timorese people's connections with freshwater springs. Visiting their extended family from the border kingdom of Lookeu, I had gleaned deep insight into the ways in which water and springs had, much like this Lookeu family, moved for centuries back and forth across eastern and western parts of the island.

The colonial-imposed border divided not only the island but also its people, including the people of the traditional mountainous kingdom of Lookeu, the royal domain of Agus and Balthasar's ancestors.



Photo 3: Rice fields and mountains in the kingdom of Lookeu.

Awaiting my return flight back to Australia, I was languishing in the tropical heat of one of Kupang airport's outdoor eateries. After a physically and emotionally intense visit, I was pleased with the research and happy to be returning home to my family. To pass the time, Agus began telling me intriguing stories about bees and wild honey harvests, of ceremonies involving whole communities and of his own ability to morph into the role of a *laku* during these events.

Laku, in the Tetum Terik language of the border region, refers to the Asian palm civet cat. However, as I learnt in the case of the honey harvest, *laku* refers to a specific group of men who, at certain times of the year, take on the persona of a *laku* and climb tens of metres into the forest canopy in pursuit of wild honey, bee larvae and wax. Like the civet cat, these men only climb in the darkness of the night. Like the cats, they call out to each other and to others around as they search out the sweetness hidden within the canopy's branches. Brave and sonorous, these human *laku* climb great heights comfortably to secure honey and wax accompanied only by

firesticks, smoke and song. Once in the canopy, they silently receive the inevitable stings on their scantily clad bodies, while imploring the bees to descend and give up their ‘houses’ (hives) for the benefit of those gathered below to sing, dance and consume the honey and bee larvae. Agus had once been a *laku* himself. Listening to his stories, I knew that this would not be my only visit. In retrospect, I think that Agus was already hooking me in.

Balthasar is a family friend and a long-term academic collaborator. Born in Portuguese Timor, ‘the hands of destiny’ (in his own words) led him to attend formal education in West Timor and Flores, Indonesia, and in different parts of the world. In 1993, he was awarded a doctoral degree in philosophy by Columbia University in New York. In his later life he decided to refocus his attention away from Western philosophy and return to the indigenous philosophies he had lived during his youth. In appearance and demeanour, the two brothers are strikingly different. Balthasar is lean with fine angular features, while Agus has much broader facial features and a more muscular physique. The latter is something of a raconteur and adventurer with a keen ear for a story and an eye for logistics. A university technical administrator, he had spent many years in his youth working as the offsider for the Darwin-based historian Peter Spillett. Together they travelled the island, sourcing and carrying out interviews with customary elders about Timor’s precolonial history. Agus, like his five other brothers, was also deeply versed in tradition and had always been keen to resume this role of cultural brokerage.

So, in April 2018, I arrived back in Kupang, this time with my husband, Quin, and our two children, Madalena and Zeca, then aged 8 and 11. Agus had meticulously organised the details of our visit, all the while trying to allay concerns that the honey harvest was still some way off—if indeed it was to happen at all. ‘*Wani sedauk tama,*’ he told me, somewhat anxiously. (‘The bees have not entered.’) Just what the bees were still to enter, I was not yet sure. In the meantime, we had some time on our hands.

At Quin’s instigation, we visited the Chinese temple down in the old port area. To get there we had to find our way through the old part of town. We spent a brief but intense period of time hustling ourselves and the kids through the frenetic traffic of motorbikes and brightly coloured minibuses, music blaring. Kupang was not a place for walkers. Yet, in the narrow streets of this part of town, there was still a scattering of old Dutch and Chinese colonial architecture. Its close and bustling atmosphere was also a reprieve from the more obnoxiously modern hotels and shopping malls springing up elsewhere.

Finally, we arrived at the temple. It had been built, we found out, in the mid-1800s by the then flourishing southern Chinese community, although it was later partially destroyed by aerial bombing in World War II. Its rebuilt frontage was still reminiscent of a traditional Chinese style, with impressive pillars and arch emblazoned with Chinese lettering and three concrete sculptures: crab, peacock and lizard. These, we were informed, represented the animals associated with the Chinese clans who had first established the temple using main pillars brought from mainland China. Quin's particular interest in visiting the temple was because he suspected that Kupang was the port of arrival for his paternal grandfather who had migrated from southern China via Macau and settled in the east of the island sometime around the 1900s.

The Timorese-Chinese caretakers of the temple greeted us warmly. They gave our kids cool drinks and brought out their holiday snaps from a past visit with some of their relatives in Sydney. Quin, too, has many relatives in Sydney; it was there that he had first found refuge in Australia in the mid-1990s. On this occasion though, try as they might, neither Quin nor the temple caretakers could establish direct connections between their respective Chinese families. Sydney was, for the moment at least, too far away. Neither did they know anything about his Chinese grandfather's arrival in Timor. They did, though, appreciate our visit.

We had planned to stay a while in the capital, but in the end, we didn't stay long. The heat that April was oppressive. On our second day, as we sought out lunch at an empty harbourside eatery, we asked the restaurateur where everyone was. 'The people in Kupang are like bats,' she exclaimed. 'They only come out at night.' Later, when we met Balthasar's sister-in-law who lives on the border, she said that Kupang is different to the rest of West Timor. When I asked how, she replied: 'Its sweaty heat makes your skin white.' It was not exactly the explanation I had been expecting. But, considering the restaurateur's comment, I guess it made sense.

As we left Kupang for Kefa, our next destination, we stopped at a shop on the urban fringe to buy some credit for our phones. Apart from Agus and his family, we hadn't met any East Timorese people since our arrival. Yet, here on the edge of town, in the heart of a bustling commercial hub, we found ourselves engaged in commerce with two young East Timorese women. The pair had fled the violence of their birthplace as small children. Now adult, they were yet to return to Timor-Leste. 'Our mothers, aunts and grandmothers go back now and then,' they said, adding nonchalantly: 'Our home is here. We live here among the locals. We are now local.'

For Quin, this was a revelation. To hear that these young women might not countenance a return was a little shocking to him. He, too, had been forced to flee his birth country. But, as soon as he was able, he had returned—at least for regular visits. ‘What’s stopping you from going back?’ he asked incredulously. ‘You are Timorese!’ (clearly forgetting for a moment that he was actually in Timor). Perhaps by way of drawing them back into that shared identity, as we left Quin gave them each a little money and told them to study hard and not marry early. They were pleased, and I think a little touched by the gesture. There was in that exchange something unspoken between the three of them, something that drew them together, just as other factors held them apart. These are the interwoven connections between East Timorese that I have borne witness to on countless occasions: bonds forged through uneven mixtures of belonging, connection, displacement, unspeakable horror, joy, pride and determination.

As our journey east followed the increasingly rural roads, our driver Patrice pointed out the fertile and productive rice and vegetable fields along the way. ‘These are all farmed by refugees from East Timor,’ he said. ‘They are such hard workers. Not like the locals, who are lazy.’ It was the same refrain one hears about Indonesian workers in Timor-Leste, but in reverse. The newcomers to an area, Timorese say, always have to work harder. They don’t have the land or family connections that locals can rely on to get by. Patrice was himself a quiet, hardworking young man. His wife and new baby were back on the border where Patrice usually worked as a truck driver for one of Balthasar’s brothers. His parents were also refugees from further east, settling on the Indonesian side of the border after they fled the civil strife in Portuguese Timor in the 1970s.

Our drive to Kefa, where another of the Lookeu brothers lived, was on a relatively smooth but windy road. It struck me, again, that the houses and gardens we passed along the way were so much more orderly than was typical of Timor-Leste. Absent, too, were the waving throngs of children that, in Timor-Leste, are a constant in every village you pass through. These villages seemed to be largely deserted. People are busy, I was told; they are all out working. It was notable that even the most modern of houses had a round open-sided hut alongside it, many with a tin rather than traditional thatched roof. These day huts were the household-level custom houses of the region, places where family ‘business’ gets done, and where corn and other goods are stored. Similar, but more enclosed

and elaborate, clan-level origin houses could also be glimpsed from time to time. Ancestral traditions, it was evident, were even here still redolent in everyday life.

Everywhere we travelled, there were roadside billboards featuring candidates in the forthcoming provincial elections. Chatting to the people we met along the way, politics seemed to be on everyone's lips. Many, it seemed, were hoping for the election of a Timorese-born governor. Since El Tari, the popular and respected Timorese-born governor (1966–78), the majority of the governors have come from the neighbouring island of Flores, and an increasingly large Florenese population now dominates Kupang's political, administrative and business life. Some people muttered that they would like West Timor to become a separate province, if the right leader should emerge. By this, they meant someone smart, capable and, above all, someone who has 'people' or a large support base. In the forthcoming elections, there were three main contenders: the first-ever female candidate from the island of Rote, a Catholic candidate from Flores and a Protestant candidate from Timor.

West Timor is often characterised as half Catholic and half Protestant (with the latter mainly living in the far west). Some people spoke to us about how their half-island population was changing. They spoke in hushed tones of an unofficial internal migration program that actively encouraged many devout Muslim Indonesians to settle on the island, especially along the border. Lands, too, they said, were increasingly being bought up by outsiders. In these areas, people talked worriedly about their perceptions of an increasing Islamisation of the region and of the rapid pace at which mosques were being built. They mentioned the ever-increasing number of Javanese and Sumatran restaurants and furniture-making businesses lining the roadsides of West Timor's major towns. They said that forests were increasingly being logged and used to make furniture for export to Timor-Leste, a nation they now associated with American dollars and wealth.

Through all our encounters and conversations, it was not yet clear to me what people in West Timor made of Timor-Leste's independence and new nation status. Was there hostility about its decision to separate from the Indonesian state, ambivalence about its status, or pride and hope founded on a common Timorese identity? I thought I discerned a mixture of all three, but these reactions were not something people spoke openly about.

The next stop in our journey was Kefamenanu (Kefa), a forlorn market town nestled in the plateau of several mountain ranges. There we planned to spend time with Niko, another of Balthasar's brothers, and his wife, Effie. Niko, born into a royal house across the border in Fatumean, was now a local high school principal. Effie, herself a descendant of local Kefa royalty, was a district bureaucrat. Both, we found out, continued to practice their ancestral house-based religions at the same time as being devout Catholics. One day they took us to their church. A newly built, monumental brick structure of cavernous proportions, it stood alone in its remote rural landscape. Its stark architectural emptiness was more than matched though by the raucous beauty of the many local school children singing and marching in the church grounds as they practised for the events of a forthcoming saint's day. The local priest came over to greet us warmly, exceedingly happy at a rare foreign visit.

Later in the car, I asked Effie about how marriage relations played out in this part of the country. I was curious to know if it was like Timor-Leste where the marital alliances between couples and their associated origin houses are cemented through the exchange of cultural goods. 'Oh yes,' she said, 'it's still strong.' This surprised me, perhaps because adherence to these practices seemed at odds with the veneer of modernity we could see everywhere in this part of the country, including the many large buildings and monuments celebrating the state and organised religion. Effie explained that intermarrying families still actively exchange cattle, money and goats. Pigs are also exchanged, but they are used more for feasting. The particular details of the exchange would, she said, depend on the customs of the intermarrying origin houses, the socioeconomic status of the families and, very often, the educational level of the couple. Effie told me that in one part of Flores, where her father was from, the 'price' is raised for every level of education the woman had completed.

Niko and Effie had met at university, but in many ways their marriage had followed an ancient path of alliance-making. Building on a long-standing alliance between the respective houses, Niko's family from Fatumean had brought buffalo across the border to the palace of Biboki in Tam Kesi, Effie's birthplace. The name Tam Kesi is derived from Tetum Terik words meaning to enter and become tied/bound to place (*tama*=to enter, *kesi*=to tie). We decided that while in Kefa we would make a visit to the Tam Kesi palace. It was to be the first time that Effie had returned since she was eight years old.



Photo 4: View from Biboki highlands towards Oecusse.

It was a two-hour trip from Kefa to the palace. Without local knowledge, we would have had no hope of finding it. What started as a narrow road as we wound through the villages of the Biboki kingdom then became a dirt path across high grasslands filled with herds of cattle and horses. From these green pastures we could see all the way to Timor-Leste, both the mountainous ring to the north-west that enclosed the drylands of the coastal exclave of Oecusse and the forested mountains of Fatumean in Suai much further to the east. After passing through a ‘gate’ marked by a thicket of trees, we descended slightly to the base of two karstic megaliths that now blocked our path. Niko and Effie stopped the vehicles in the thickly forested grove and set off by foot down to the local village to seek permission to enter the palace. They returned with the village head’s wife who led us through the forest and an opening in a low rock fence. From there, we entered an exquisite assembly of houses set among elaborate stone terracing. Passing through an area dedicated to ornately carved ritual poles, we were flanked on our right by the megaliths, and on our left by the stone walls and steps leading up a steep hill through terraced earthen courtyards and rock altars. The latter belonged, respectively, to six large, round wooden origin houses, all with thatched roofing. A small

group of women were gathered under the roof of the first house. One was weaving cloth; others were chatting beside a pile of drying wild tubers that were to be onsold to Chinese merchants for use in the cosmetic industry.

We headed up the steps that wound past the five subsidiary origin houses until we reached the main house of the king. The king was out, tending his animals. A young girl was given some money to go and fetch him by motorbike taxi. It seemed that visiting in the company of descended royalty gave us certain privileges.

When he finally arrived, the king's visual appearance was little different to any other farmer we had passed along the way. What he lacked in majestic visual impact, though, he made up for in oratory ability. He carefully explained to us the importance of this setting for local lives and the wider governance of the Timor Tengah Utara (TTU) district for which Kefa is the capital. The palace complex housed six families, although many more lived in the village below. The twinned megaliths, understood as a cosmological pairing of male and female complementarity, were the centre of their religious life. In times of communal hardship, such as drought or famine, the villagers would come together to sacrifice a goat and a rooster on the peaks. Both animals would be carried alive along a treacherous path to the top of the 'male' megalith. It was almost impossible to see where people could ascend these sheer rock faces, but apparently they could do so with a goat strung across the shoulders and a chicken tucked under the arm. The goat would be killed and eaten atop the megalith. The rooster would be tied to the top and left there, crowing until it died. The ritual was to serve as redress for any community wrongdoing and to encourage the ancestral spirits to return to the people their livelihood, fertility and the rains.

Later, the king elaborated on the connections between the palace of Tam Kesi and other places across island Timor. 'This is one of the most powerful sites in the whole region,' he said. Every new governor of the TTU district would come to Tam Kesi prior to taking office. There the governor would make an offering and receive in return the sacred governing power emanating from the palace. Indeed, the king told us, Tam Kesi is the origin centre of island Timor, the place from where all the other kingdoms spread. Its daughters, he said, continue to marry out into these kingdoms, including into Timor-Leste and the royal houses of Oecusse and Fatumean. Here, again, it was clear that beneath the veneer of order and modernity, West and East Timor have as much in common customarily as that which currently divides them politically.



Photo 5: The main palace at Tam Kesi.



Photo 6: Honeycomb in the megaliths of Tam Kesi.

As we spoke with the king among the rock altars, houses and megaliths of the palace, he was careful to instruct us where we could and couldn't photograph according to the potency of each site. Our children and Niko and Effie's children ('town kids') played ball in the courtyard of the main house. Towards the end of our discussions, I looked over and saw to my horror that they were resting the ball precariously on a rock altar in front of the main house. I imagined my son rushing in to kick it off at any moment. The king was seemingly unfazed by the incident, but it took me some time to recover. Nonetheless, at the end of our visit, he called the children over and blessed them by sprinkling water over them and blowing on the crowns of their heads. They were now safe to return home.

Our descent from the place wound a loop around the rear of the twin megaliths. From there, the mountains of Timor-Leste felt close enough to reach out and touch. It was then that I noticed a gigantic honeycomb drooping dramatically down a cliff edge halfway up the male megalith. A good sign, I thought to myself. In Tam Kesi, the bees had already entered.

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