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Ritual and Recovery

While in Baucau, our friend Atinu invited us to participate in a healing ceremony at Wai Lia Bere, the famous cave water source on an otherwise arid plateau. I had worked with Atinu as a research collaborator and translator over many years. His father, who had been an important figure in my early water research, had died a few years earlier, and Atinu had then become the senior custodian of Wai Lia Bere and its associated house, Ledatame Ikun. My participation in this event was encouraged by Atinu, and together we were making a film on customary approaches to healing. While the footage of this day was not, in the end, included in the final film, the event had a profound influence on the film's composition.

As I understood it, one of Atinu's nephews was ill and was going to be healed by the waters flowing beneath the Wai Lia Bere cave. It turned out, though, that I had misunderstood the gist of the story. This was not exactly a healing ceremony: Atinu's nephew had been very ill and had almost died, but he was already healed. Something had attacked him and taken his spirit. But with the water's help, the family had recovered it, and his spirit had been restored to his body. Now was the time to acknowledge and formally thank these healing ancestral waters. The purpose of the ceremony was to give thanks to the ancestral spirits for his return to health.

Wai Lia Bere is said to feed the flow of water to Wai Lia in Baucau and it is the cave through which the younger of the buffalo-herding brothers had long ago travelled after their dog had located the water source. This cave is also understood to be a gateway or 'door' for water flowing to other springs in the region; it is considered a critical feeder of springs across the escarpment zone. I had first visited Wai Lia Bere eight years ago

for a community ceremony aimed at ensuring this downstream flow of water. It seemed that my research had come full circle. Back then, I was just beginning my journey to understand this complex watery landscape. Now I was back again, only now I was focused on research into Timorese approaches to healing.

Despite the fact I hadn't met with most of the senior men during an interlude of eight years, we were now greeted like old friends. Some things had changed. We remembered Atinu's father and another senior ritual leader, now gone. Eight years ago I had met Atinu, but this was the first day I had met his wife, Silvana. She had had her own struggle with illness over the years and had lived much of the intervening time in her natal house in the mountains of Matebian. She and Atinu had suffered greatly, losing a child during that period. Yet, today, as we gathered at their house prior to heading to Wai Lia Bere, she was proudly serving her visitors coffee and fried bananas, and Atinu sat happily holding their nine-month-old baby, Olivia. At the time of our first meeting eight years ago, he had been working as a teacher, and everyone still refers to him in this role. But, having trained as a veterinarian during the Indonesian era, he now worked in the Ministry of Agriculture. With his deep understanding of local languages and cultures, Atinu is a man adept at working across worlds.

When we had first met in 2008 it was only a brief encounter. I had already met, and was familiar with, his father, his brother and a cousin. Yet Atinu had made an impression on me; he was quiet and understated but clearly attentive to the aims of the water research. It was not, however, until my father-in-law's favourite dog, Lobu, needed urgent veterinary attention that we again sought him out. Private vets are unheard of in Baucau, but as we now knew about Atinu's role treating livestock for the agriculture department, we took a chance and drove up to his rental house in town. Atinu did not think our request strange and responded with a house call, attending to the dog with great care and concern. With Lobu healed, our connection with Atinu had also been deepened. Dogs feature in many of the region's water stories, creating bonds between people and communities over long distances. While veterinary care was a twist on this tradition, as Atinu himself reminded us, dogs are *lulik* for his Ledatame Ikun house; they are effectively its life-givers. We later discovered that Atinu was also related to us through marriage as his mother's family were in a longstanding relationship as the life-giving house for Quin's grandmother's house.

Wai Lia Bere is a part of the Makasae-speaking village of Gariuai, but it is located on the savannah in the Gariuai sub-village of Darasula (the name translates as ‘the edge of the savannah’) (see Map 3 in Chapter 7). The former *chefe* (head) of Darasula was there at Atinu’s house, too. Although no longer formally the sub-village head, he is still referred to as *chefe*. He lives down and on the other side of the road from Atinu. This slight difference in east–west geography means that the *chefe* will usually speak Waima’a at home. Meanwhile, the households on Atinu’s side of the road usually speak Makasae. Atinu and the *chefe* are first cousins and they are adept speakers of both languages, yet this modern road marks a much older border. A savannah-edge meeting point between cultural groups has been preserved to this day linguistically, if not in the village administrative structures.

While waiting for the others to arrive, the *chefe* told me he has frequently re-watched the short video of the water-increase ceremony that I had made for him and other villagers eight years ago. He said that watching it makes him feel closer to those who are no longer living. Sitting next to the *chefe* was Simiao, his cousin’s (and Atinu’s sister’s) son. Simiao, who studies at university in Dili, shyly brought out his smart phone to show us photos of himself when he was ill. His whole body was swollen, but especially his arms. He couldn’t walk or move his arms for many weeks and moved back to Darasula to be cared for by his family. He thought he was going to die. He explained, though, that this wasn’t a medical problem. While nurses from Baucau would sometimes come and give him injections to help with the swelling, afterwards the swelling would increase. So the nurses said that he needed to wait for the swelling to settle before they could treat him again. Simiao explained that the nurses told Simiao’s family that they ‘must first look for the source of the problem inside your own house’. This meant asking the ancestors. Simiao’s maternal uncles began a quest to locate the source of the problem. To do this, they sacrificed a chicken and examined its liver for signs of ancestral displeasure. ‘It tells them what the problems are,’ Simiao explained.

Later, after we knew the source of the problem, I was healed by medicine from his mother’s house. Today, we are paying the debt to the ancestors for enabling that healing. I was ill because my father’s house wasn’t in order and that left me open to attack from dangerous spirits. I have been good for about a month now.

The *chefe* also explained to me how Atinu and another senior ritual leader had come together at the Ledatame Ikun house to find a way to restore Simiao's health. After a complicated fact-finding mission, they had carried out a ritual to seek help from the ancestors of the house—the same house whose ancestor had travelled underground from the Wai Lia Bere cave and emerged at the Wai Lia spring in Baucau all those generations ago. The cure was achieved through a two-step process: access to waters of Wai Lia Bere, followed by a ritual to sacralise betel leaves inside the Ledatame Ikun, his mother's and uncles' houses. These leaves were then taken by Atinu and rubbed over the body of the seriously ill Simiao. We were going to Wai Lia Bere to give thanks to the ancestral spirits of the water. The following day a similar ritual would take place at the Ledatame Ikun house.

By now, around 20 men had gathered at the house, our departure point. The first man sped off with a goat and lengths of cut bamboo tied up in the back of this three-wheel motorbike. Others departed on two-wheel motorbikes with chickens bound to the handlebars and various numbers of pillion passengers on the back. Others of us piled into our four-wheel-drive vehicle. We were all headed several kilometres inland along a dusty open-savannah track to Wai Lia Bere.



Photo 32: Main road, Darasula.

By the time our car arrived at the scrubby clearing near the entry to Wai Lia Bere cave, the ceremony preparations were in full swing. The chickens had been assembled by the tree and rock altar, along with the goat. The bamboo was being cut up further for cooking and for use as water receptacles. Strings of areca palm nut were hung by a senior ritual leader on a notch on the tree. An old man was laying out baskets of betel leaf and lime powder on the stone altar. Lastly, he added a packet of cigarettes. Counting seven chickens in total, I surmised it to be a significant ceremony.

Much later, I found out that offerings relating to Simiao's sickness and healing was only one of a suite of offerings that day. The healing was being directed at both the individual and at the broader collective who were gathered at the spring. This dual purpose was abundantly clear to everyone else, but it hadn't been explained to us. The ceremony was carried out in Makasae, and sometimes Waima'a. While Quin speaks some Makasae, he is not from the area nor an expert on the deeper functioning of the ritual world. At these events, he often prefers to remain in the background and talk politics with the younger men. Luckily, I had been to enough similar ceremonies of this general kind to be able to follow and anticipate the flow of events. Managing the boredom and demands of our kids during such an event was another matter, but even they were getting used to it.

Mari Kai Wai Mata Bu (literally meaning 'Mari Kai the owner of the water'), a direct descendant of the ancestor who had fallen into the cave waters, travelled underground and emerged in the Wai Lia spring in Baucau, was present at the ceremony and would have a major role in each of the ritual stages. At one point early on, I noticed one of the senior men snip off a piece of the goat's ear, seemingly without the notice of the goat, and walk off in another direction with two of the chickens. I was told that he was going to make offerings to Wai Mata Ana, another deep cave and water source nearby that is sometimes referred to as the 'wife' to Wai Lia Bere. It is from this cave, some Baucau people tell me, that Wai Lia Bere water custodians are able to manipulate the water supply to those lower down in the watershed.

Once again, I was filming the ceremony. Afterwards I would edit it and it would be given to those present on the day. As well as being a contribution to the film we were making, the video process is also for me a research tool. I simply can't observe and take everything in at these complex events. Video allows me to observe and take in a range of other

sensory experiences, while creating a detailed visual record. This record means I can later sit with the process again, notice details that escaped me at the time and try to make sense of the whole. It is always important to pay attention to exactly who was doing what, how and when. As most of the ceremony was in Makasae, I could call on Quin to help me later translate the gist of what is being said. Even so, I know that much will remain opaque. To dwell deeper in the ritual politics and processes at play I would need to sit, for many more hours, with Atinu. Together we would need to work through the translation into Tetum and discuss at length the various possible interpretations of what was being said and done.

After the senior man had taken the goat's ear and chickens to Wai Mata Ana, the next two stages of the ritual involved separate offerings of the goat and a black chicken at Wai Lia Bere. While the chicken was taken directly to the entrance of the cave, the body of the much larger goat was absent, but it was made present through prayer. Later, a twig collected from the rock and tree altar at the cave's entrance was brushed over the head of the goat when the animal was sacrificed at the savannah altar. Following the chicken and goat sacrifices, each animal's liver or entrails would be read by the assembled senior ritual experts, and the body parts cooked by the youth. In this way, the ancestors are speaking through and with the bodies of these animals. After this, all of the cooked body parts would be laid out as offerings by the altar for the final ceremony.

Only the senior ritual leaders made journeys to the cave entrance, and I followed them with my video camera. All of the others stayed by the savannah altar, seamlessly engaged in the many tasks of food preparation. Apart from Madalena and myself, all roles were performed by men and boys on this occasion. When I asked if women were ordinarily prohibited at such ceremonies, the *chefe* simply said that the women were all busy. With so much to do on the home front, they couldn't always get away for ceremonies. This casual division of labour reminded me that food preparation in Timor is by no means the sole task of women.

During the first prayer by the cave entrance, the two ritual leaders squatted on the ground in front of the simple rock altar. Mari Kai Wai Mata Bu stood behind them. One of the old men began to speak to the ancestors of the cave:

We are making this offering to you of a goat and a male and female chicken. This is our final offering in this process. We are small people, you are big. Please look after us. Don't be angry or jealous. We have offered this to you. Protect us, too, from getting sick when others who might be angry or jealous of us seek to do us harm. We are looking to you for protection. Please look after us. Look after those of us who are not here. Look after those who are away studying. Help them write well.

During the second offering, we returned to the entrance with a single black chicken. We were accompanied by a man from Cape Bondura. He squatted behind the two old ritual leaders, one of whom held the chicken. Mari Kai stood once more at the rear. The old man holding the chicken began again to speak to the ancestors:

Now, in the era of democracy, many of your people are studying far away from here. Some travel over the sea. They work with pens. Please look after them. Keep them safe. Help them to do their jobs well. This is their offering to you.

The next stage of the ceremony occurred back at the savannah altar. Simiao and his father were called to sit in front of the altar. Holding the red rooster, one of the ritual leaders spoke to the ancestors:

Your grandson has brought a chicken to thank you for healing his sickness. He has brought a chicken, so we can call out and honour your name. Something attacked him, but you helped him. Please don't make him sick again. We as elders are speaking, we are praying for him. Not all our in-law houses could come, but your grandson's father speaks for them. His words will reach you.

Squatting down in front of the altar, the father spoke humbly, eyes to the ground. He repeated a similar message, only this time his words were spoken in Waima'a. He gave thanks to the ancestral owners of the land and waters for healing his son. The rooster was then killed, and its liver was read. Much consternation and discussion accompanied the reading. Later, I was told that the reading had revealed that others from outside the Wai Lia Bere custodial house, Ledatame, were still jealous and that they were still making 'bad medicine'. 'What will you do?' I asked Simiao's father. Looking at me a little incredulously he replied: 'The ancestors will look after us now. We have given the issue to them.'



Photo 33: Simiao and final water blessing.



Photo 34: Offering inside Wai Lia Bere cave.

After all the animals had been offered, read and prepared, and the new rice had been cooked in the bamboo lengths, all the food was laid out on bamboo plates—on the altar for the ancestors, and on the ground for the living. It was then time to take an offering down a narrow and steep pathway, into the cave itself. We descended about 10 metres underground before we reached the water. A bamboo plate of meat and rice was placed by one of the ritual leaders on a rocky upper ledge above the water. Mari Kai and others used flashlights on their phones to scramble down the rocks and fill their jerry cans from the fast-flowing stream of water that rushed through the cave. This was the place where Mari Kai's ancestor had fallen all those years ago. 'Go carefully,' others yelled out from above, lest history repeat itself.

After drawing water, we returned to the savannah altar for the penultimate stage of the ceremony. Water was poured into bamboo lengths and placed on the altar. Mari Kai would use this water later to wash the bodies of the cured Simiao and his close associates. All of those connected to the Ledatame Ikun house and the houses of its significant in-laws were now seated or squatting in front of the altar. I noticed for the first time a yellow dog that sat majestically among them. The senior ritual leaders took turns speaking to the ancestors. The first man spoke:

We can't be jealous or angry. We are the small people. Our elders have died. Only we are left, the small people. You need to look after us, to help us fix things, to follow the path. We don't know the details of what our ancestors did and promised each other. But as in the past, we continue making our offerings to you. We will always call out and honour your name.

Then, a second ritual leader took over:

I am your grandparent's child. There have been problems, but we have all come together to fix them. We have resolved it. We have told everyone. We seek your forgiveness. We [the living] have resolved our problems. Now you need to look after us. Give us life.

We ask you, our ancestors and our future generations, don't make us sick. We are the small people; our elders have gone. We have come together, both sides of these family alliances. If there was conflict in the past, we don't know the details. Please give us pardon.

You know it all, but please forgive us our ignorance. Pass on your spirit to us. Give us your force. Reinforce these offerings we have made to all the ancestors.

We [the living] will always be family together. We are Wai Husu Wai Lewa. We are small, but together. We ask our children not to cause problems among the living.

Why, I wondered, did this last prayer refer to Wai Husu Wai Lewa? I knew, from previous research, that the ritually paired springs of Wai Husu Wai Lewa referred to the powerful alliance that brought villages together from across the lush Baucau escarpment zone and its drier hinterland. The leader was drawing on an ancestral pact and governance arrangement intended to ensure peace, harmony and water sharing across the region. Yet here the alliance was being invoked in relation to the healing ceremony of this 20-something young man whose life, it was now clear, had hung in the balance because of unfinished business in the ancestral past.

Later, when all the ceremony was done, Atinu organised for his nephew, Simiao's father and the *chefe* to explain, for the purposes of the video, what had gone on during the ritual and the background to these events. The *chefe* explained how the ceremony was tied to 'an ancient path', a longstanding connection between particular origin houses:

This is our riches. Our riches come from strengthening these relations to strengthen our health. If we leave behind this heritage, we are in trouble. Our ancestors give us our health. We can't lose this tradition. This is our Timorese identity.

Simiao told me later, after the ceremony: 'Today I feel proud. When I was sick the whole family gathered together to enable me to regain my health. If they hadn't come together, I might have died.' For Simiao and his family, family unity was the key to healing:

If the family doesn't come together when there are problems we can't live well. In the past our ancestors were together. We need to be together too. For us, health and culture go together. Going on our own doesn't work. Both sides of the family must come together.

Atinu had told me that he wouldn't say much during the interview. But, as usual, it was his interview—the final statement of the day—that offered the greatest clarity. He told me how, as members of the house of Ledatame Ikun, his family were connected to the story of the water

of Wai Lia, the spring in Baucau. It was their ancestor who travelled through the water and that was why it was important that Mari Kai Wai Mata Bu was also present at the ceremony. He explained: 'We don't carry out our curing rituals with things other than water and betel leaf.' As his in-laws and nephew had been attacked by an angered spirit, betel leaves taken from the Ledatame house were needed to repel the attack.

We needed to use two bundles of five and seven leaves. Five of them were for the ancestors of the house; the bundle of seven were for our ancestors that now reside in the water. We used this to cure our nephew. Now he is better.

The power of the Wai Lia underground water was thus central to the healing process. It is the water that gives the power to the senior ritual leaders of Ledatame Ikun to heal. Just as the politics of water sharing permeates the lives of those living in the lower part of the watershed, so it permeates life up on the plateau.

Atinu explained that, to repay the debt to these ancestors, two ceremonies were needed: one at the cave to repay the debt to the powerful ancestors and nature spirits that gave the house its security, and a second ceremony at the Ledatame Ikunhouse, involving a further goat and two chickens. The latter would take place the next day 'to tell the ancestors of the house that it was through their culture that we were able to bring this boy back from the dead'.

According to Atinu, the cause of the sickness was a break in the marital pathway of exchanges flowing between the intermarried houses of Ledatame Ikun and Gariuai:

We needed to get things in order. This is why we brought everyone together today at Wai Lia Bere. We informed the ancestors of the success of the healing. As a result, we have all recovered *matak malirin* [greening coolness], our capacity to flourish in life.

The path flowing between the houses of Ledatame Ikun and Gariuai was a transgenerational one:

Generations ago, we gave them a place here in the savannah to live. Until this day, if they encounter problems or sickness, they will come to the house of Ledatame Ikun to restore their capacity to flourish.



Photo 35: Simiao's father at medicinal tree.

Simiao's father's house, where our interview took place, is not far from the underground waters of Wai Lia Bere. The nearby land was used to grow an acre or so of chilli and tomato, both of which relied on groundwater. While the crops belonged to the household, the farming is taking place on the land of Ledatame Ikun. The land and the water are conjoined in a land use arrangement that extends generations into the past. The power of the water infuses with the land. When we arrived at the house, Simiao's father grabbed a crowbar and signalled for us to follow him behind the house and into the savannah. He took us a short distance to a spindly 2-metre-tall tree, where he kneeled down and carefully dug away some of the red earth to expose the tree's roots. 'I dug up some of this root,' he said with great pride. 'It also helped cure my son and enabled him to recover from the attack.'

The eventual film *Holding Tightly: Custom and Healing in Timor-Leste*¹ observes various manifestations of *hun no dikin*, the key Timorese botanical metaphor that in Tetum translates literally as 'base/trunk and

¹ See: *Holding Tightly: Custom and Healing in Timor-Leste*, Ronin Films, Arkivu Dijital Kultura no Ekolojia Timor-Leste (Cultural Ecology of Timor-Leste Digital Archive), 2021, accessed 25 June 2021, arkivukulturaekolojia.com/waimata-films#/films-holding-tightly/.

tips', more symbolically as 'beginnings and endings/renewal'. This core image of the tree, roots and sprouting tips reflects intertwined human and non-human relationships and processes. Botanical life cycles of watering, growth, flowering, decline and regeneration reflect these human and non-human growth pathways, the connections between houses, their roots or base and their tips or new generations. The metaphor leads on directly to another: *matak malirin* (greening coolness), the aim of all ritual processes concerning life flourishing, good health and vitality. As Jose da Costa, the healer and keeper of the water from Baucau town, once told me: 'Water cures people. The power of water comes from its coolness. All medicine gets its life from water.'

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