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Enclave Society

Quin and the kids were travelling on East Timorese passports, so they could easily cross by land into the Oecusse exclave of Timor-Leste. But, for me, it was not so straightforward. When I finally received notification that I had secured a visa, we were off. From Kefa, the border was an hour or so drive up a steep mountainous climb. On the way, we passed through the village of Napan. This place was full of pro-Indonesian militia in 1999, our driver Patrice told us.

We reached the tiny mountain border post and began the seemingly endless checks required by the full gamut of bureaucracies housed on the hillside. First, we presented ourselves to the Indonesian military, then to the Indonesian police, then the health department, immigration and customs. At each checkpoint, our passports were intently scrutinised. Eventually our names would be logged in a book and we would be sent on to the next tiny house.

Quin talked incessantly with each officer we met. I could tell he was nervous. Back in 1994 when he was a student in Indonesia, he had helped to organise an East Timorese resistance protest during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Jakarta. United States President Bill Clinton was to be an attendee, so it was a prime opportunity to garner media attention for the Timorese cause. During the protest, Quin was arrested and then interrogated by Indonesian intelligence for two weeks. He was finally released due to international pressure, and the East Timorese student resistance network organised for him to flee to Australia through the backdoor of the Balinese airport. The Timorese stationed there as custom officers had literally driven him out onto the tarmac.

For Quin, like most Timorese, checkpoints and immigration processes reignite the memories of such traumatic times, particularly when the authorities are Indonesian.

Yet that day, as usual, those nerves were hidden behind a jovial deference that he was extending to his country's former occupiers. He talked nonstop about anything he thought might break the ice, cut through formalities and make a connection: his children, his travels, his knowledge of particular people or places in Indonesia. At one stage, the kids and I were asked to go pose in the middle of the border for a photo with one of the Indonesian guards. At long last, we made it through.

The Indonesian border guards, by now friendly, even broke their own rules and let us drive our car through to the East Timorese border post a kilometre away on the other side. From there, another car was waiting to take us to the Oecusse capital, Pante Makasar. On this day, the 1 km drive through no-man's-land was desolate, but we were told that once a month it transformed into a lively marketplace where locals from both sides of the border came to sell their goods.

Once we arrived at the small bamboo shack that constituted the East Timorese military checkpoint, the atmosphere was immediately more relaxed. Nonetheless, the customs officer asked us to place our bags on his desk for inspection. As the desk heaved and nearly broke under the weight of our suitcase, he promptly abandoned the task. Despite the hundreds of millions of dollars currently being poured by the Timorese government into Oecusse's new special economic zone, known as ZEESM, the proper fitting-out of mountain border posts was clearly not yet a priority.

After clearing customs, we loaded our bags into our changeover car, farewelled Patrice and waited while our new driver hitched a lift back across the border to buy some cheap cigarettes. The man who escorted him across was an Indonesian military officer. Quin enjoyed the chance to banter with the Timorese border guards about local politics and happenings. In contrast to the deference he had just shown to the Indonesian authorities, now he was talking so casually he could have been with his own family.

As we piled into the car and headed down the mountains towards the coast and Pante Makasar, we could all sense the change in the place, both physically and emotionally. The road was immediately terrible, made of dirt and badly potholed. There were many small thatched origin houses,

and everywhere people and children waving to us. Almost immediately, our driver began to point out landmarks. With still raw emotion, he gestured to various sites along the way where, in 1999, Timorese attempting to flee the militia violence had been massacred. He pointed out the places where they were beaten, where they were killed and where they were thrown off a cliff. Private memorials dotted the hillside. We knew for sure we were back in Timor-Leste. He said we were not far from the village of Passabe, the site of a massacre by pro-Indonesian militias in the wake of the 1999 referendum.

Our new driver, a 30-something, self-assured man called Manuel, was born in the east, near Quin's own hometown of Baucau. The Makasae-speaking people from Baucau are known to be tough (it was these people that Patrice had referred to as hardworking refugees earlier in our journey). Manuel's mother was a Baikeno-speaking woman from Oecusse and he had grown up there. He told us how, before the militias left East Timorese in 1999, they had flooded into Oecusse. In a murderous fury they had forced most of the population to flee to the mountains inside Indonesia. They burnt nearly everything to the ground, even the toilets. They shot the livestock and felled the forests of teak, taking the spoils with them as they withdrew.

As we descended further into the valley, we saw groups of people in the fields harvesting their rice. I asked Manuel to stop just as we reached the valley floor, so I could take a photo of a cluster of origin houses. They reminded me of smaller versions of the origin houses I had seen a few years before in the mountains of Lookeu and Fatumean in Timor-Leste. We chatted with the people mingling outside and remarked on this similarity. A man joined us and told us that his younger brother married a woman from Fatumean. Indeed, a delegation of his family had made the journey across two international borders to negotiate the marriage exchange. As is so very often the case, it didn't take long to find a connection. This woman from Fatumean turned out to be Balthasar's niece, Adelina, whose mother was from Lookeu in West Timor. Many of her family lived in Lookeu, our destination, after Oecusse, for the honey harvest. Adelina had studied in Australia where she had shared a house with Balthasar in a street very close to our own home.

Here in Oecusse, Adelina's husband's family told us that the people in Fatumean customarily ask for buffalo from the origin house into which their daughter is marrying. But, as many local houses no longer have

buffalo, they took *morten* (red coral bead necklace) and money instead. Surprised and pleased with this unexpectedly close encounter on our first hour in Oecusse, we arranged a return visit to learn more about life in the nearby foothills. We were told to bring with us betel nut and leaf, candles and a rooster.

* * *

Manuel was a passionate supporter of the ZEESM special economic zone project that had been underway in the Oecusse-Ambeno Territory for a number of years. He was also an active militant of the youth wing of the FRETILIN political party, the party that had carriage of the ZEESM project. He had been involved in several construction projects, including a shiny new basketball and outdoor recreation facility. As we drove through the valley, he told us how ZEESM was transforming Oecusse. 'There are now so many jobs and so much development,' he enthused. 'Soon people in Oecusse will not have to grow corn or rice. They will have enough money to buy their food.' Escaping life as a rural farmer is an idea that resonates with many Timorese ideas about prosperity and the future. The last thing most people want their children to be is a farmer. Modernity is characterised for these people as the pathway 'out of the darkness' of rural life and into 'the light' of the future.

We passed a new irrigation dam, at which point the potholed dirt road, which would be impassable in the wet season, abruptly ended. We were now in ZEESM territory. A slick, wide bitumen road led from there into the town. Along the way, we saw large groups of people gathered in their newly irrigated rice fields. Some were harvesting rice; others were loading it into trucks parked along the roadside. Apart from the trucks, there was not much traffic on the road. Most rural people in Oecusse do not have motorbikes, let alone cars. Instead, their pigs and goats and cattle congregated on the bitumen, and the dogs clearly enjoyed sleeping upon its warm surface.

With the national election in Timor-Leste less than a month away, many political party flags were flying outside the houses as we drove by. Many of these flags were grouped closely together, sometimes even when they represented opposing parties. Manuel told us that this election had split families along party lines. 'Especially in the mountains,' he said, 'if brothers

fly different flags they will stop talking to each other. They will exclude each other from weddings and parties.’ ‘Understandings of democracy here have a way to go,’ he mused.

Manuel predicted that the FRETILIN party, who also formed the incumbent Timor-Leste government, would win Oecusse in a landslide. ‘They have produced results,’ he said. ‘People want development, not incessant talk about the past—which is all the other parties are offering.’ He was annoyed by the other parties’ preoccupation with the political history of the resistance struggle and who was the nation’s biggest hero. ‘In any case,’ he said, ‘the answer is clear. FRETILIN is the party of the resistance.’

All over Oecusse we encountered large billboards featuring the prime minister and architect of the ZEESM project, Dr Mari Alkatiri. The text on each billboard varied, but on each he was depicted staring off into the distance with a satisfied smile, and all highlighted the good and ongoing works of Dr Mari and his ZEESM team. Billboards for the pro-development FRETILIN political party also dotted the landscape. *Oras to’o ona* (‘The time has come’), they proclaimed. The main FRETILIN campaign rally for Oecusse was scheduled for a week’s time. ‘Then,’ declared Manuel, ‘the mountain villages will empty out as everyone descends to Oecusse town to show their support for Mari and ZEESM.’

The town centre featured even wider newly paved roads and footpaths. Shiny new ZEESM administrative buildings, an international medical clinic, a new airport and a large resort hotel were all under various stages of construction. International flights would be starting soon, we were told. Oecusse was going to become the world’s transit point into Timor-Leste.

On the day we arrived, however, the town was disconcertingly empty. We were told that was because people in Oecusse mainly now worked at night as labourers and were asleep during the day. But that night the town remained largely devoid of people, even along the town’s picturesque waterfront where we went to dine. A small group of Portuguese engineers and assorted other foreigners were congregated in a Portuguese- and Spanish-run restaurant. The European football league blared from a large TV. A few Timorese patrons sat on plastic chairs across the road at the beach. These were the only signs of life on the waterfront.

Quin turned up late to meet us for dinner. He had been out for a walk, and further down the beach had encountered a local fisherman who had sought his help to haul in a bumper catch. The late afternoon rains and the resulting calm of the sea had created a windfall of fish. Ironically, the only fish on the menu in the restaurant came from New Zealand or Portugal. We had pizza, much to the delight of Madalena and Zeca.

The deserted city streets were transformed at dawn. Throngs of fluorescent-uniformed street cleaners descended on the wide streets and pavements to ensure the freshly minted orderliness remained intact. Then, by 9 am, the streets were empty again. As the heat set in, Quin and I realised we were exhausted from the journey so far and decided to rest at the motel. The kids were bored. The Timorese-Chinese owners of the motel had similar-aged children who had frequently been to Australia to visit their relatives. But even their international credentials and limited English were not enough to break the ice with Madalena and Zeca, who were always terribly shy with unfamiliar children. They sat around and moped. Suddenly, a piglet ran by the front door of our motel room. Zeca followed it and disappeared. So did Madalena. Later I found them gathered with the motel owner's children around a mother dog. She was suckling her young—only not all of them were puppies. One was the piglet! 'Its mother rejected it,' said the motel kids, 'and it wandered across the fields over to our place a while back.' The mother dog had taken it in.

This discovery was blissful for Zeca. Half 'wolf-boy', wherever he goes in Timor he always engrosses himself with the communities of dogs he encounters. He frequently relays to me his findings about particular dogs, their quirks and interrelationships. If the dogs don't already have names, he will give them one. Boss Dog, Mummy, The Dog Who Is Out of His Mind, Siak (Fierce) and a shy dog called Eng are the names he has bestowed on some of his long-term favourites in Baucau. (Eng was so-named because he heard the other kids frequently calling out 'Eng!' to the dog and thought that was its name. He later found out *eng* means 'come' in the local Waima'a language. But the name stuck.) As his name suggests, Boss Dog was far less shy than Eng. Once he followed us to Sunday mass and refused to leave my feet the entire time. It was my first (and only) visit to that church and I only had the kids and their cousins with me. I can only guess what the villagers were saying about this strange foreigner who had brought her dog to mass.

Photo 7: Zeca and puppy with friends in the rice fields.

Dogs in Timor live freely. Their life is tough and often short, but it is full of adventure. At night, while people sleep, the dogs pay house calls on each other. When a female dog is in heat, the house of that dog will be packed day and night with brash canine visitors. These visits are lively affairs, and the associated pack fights and injuries are somewhat traumatising for Zeca who is always hanging around the edges of the pack. The positive side of these encounters, though, is new puppies—endless puppies and

generation upon generation of family relationships for him to account for and reckon with. In Bercoli, the Baucau village where we often live, Mummy is the matriarch.

Sometimes I feel the need to shield the kids from the harsher human side of a Timorese dog's often short life. Dogs, especially puppies, are used as sacrifices in harvest rituals. Sometimes they will end up as a celebratory meal for a group of men after a hard day's work. One of Zeca's uncles likes nothing more than an impromptu meal whenever one of the household puppies is run over. Many dogs will die as a result of road accidents, others from injuries sustained when they steal meat from ritual preparations or attack machete-wielding farmers passing by the house.

Conversely, dogs in Timor have always made fieldwork much easier. Even in the most remote areas, the kids will usually find a puppy somewhere to play with (or else a piglet or one of the other countless domesticated baby animals running around). Telling people stories about the way Australians live with and care for their dogs is also another useful way to amuse people and pass the time, especially during the rice harvest season. People will be enthralled by these stories. Just the idea of having hospitals for dogs is enough to set them off into peals of laughter. Quin's favourite story to relay to his relatives involves canned dog food and the Timorese refugees who, recently arrived in Australia, were said to have bought dog food thinking it was a conveniently packaged meal—dogs on-demand available in all shapes and sizes. For Timorese people, piglets wandering into houses and becoming members of a canine family unit do not even touch the sides of strange. Back in Oecusse, Zeca and Madalena spent the day getting to know this multi-species family.

Towards dusk that evening, Manuel took us out to the new bridge to the west of town, another coveted symbol of the incoming 'light' of modernity. 'That's where the nightlife is really found,' he said. 'It's *rame* [lively].' This expensive and expansive bridge had been constructed over the mouth of the same river that, upstream, contained ZEESM's irrigation dam. The paved road, however, abruptly ended on the western side of the bridge. From there it was a long and bumpy slog along the coastal dirt road to the enclave's western border with Indonesia. From Manuel's description, I had been expecting riverside bars or eateries. Instead, there were a few trucks pulled over on the side of the bridge. The drivers of the trucks and some other youth on motorbikes were busily taking selfies with the bridge structure in the background. In sleepy Oecusse, this is what constituted nightlife.

Photo 8: Noefefan Bridge, Oecusse.

Prior to the bridge visit, Manuel had driven us to a site commemorating the first Portuguese landing on the island in Lifau in 1515. In 2015, the government had erected a large-scale memorial there. According to a speech by Timor-Leste's resistance hero and former prime minister Kay Rala Xanana Gusmao, the memorial was part of a celebration of the arrival of the Portuguese to the island. The memorial also commemorated the subsequent spread of the 'light' across eastern Timor. The 'light' was an implied reference to Christianity. Yet what was also implicit in his speech was a celebration of ZEESM and the spread of the light of modernity. Unlike the largely secular states of the West, the church and modernity are still synonymous in Timor-Leste.

At the site, a large bronze replica of a Portuguese ship and its various learned crew had been installed on the foreshore. These foreign men were depicted greeting the customary chiefs of Oecusse who were there presumably to extend their welcome. Although only a few years old, the memorial was already crumbling in places. Manuel attributed the shoddy appearance to a last-minute rush to have the memorial ready in time for the 500-year anniversary celebration. It was also, he said, a clear example of how the Xanana's political party, CNRT, could not be depended upon to get things done properly—unlike FRETILIN.

Photo 9: Monument to the Portuguese arrival, Lifau.

During our visit, a police guard emerged from a building and asked us to sign the visitors' book. Aside from bands of street sweepers (the same ones we had seen at dawn in the town), we were the only visitors at the site. We chatted with the street sweepers who had looked a little forlorn as they swept up fallen flowers from the deserted grounds. But they were cheery enough, now donning impressive broadbrimmed project-issue hats to keep off the sun. In Oecusse, street sweeping is a full-time job. They told us that they sweep from 6 am to 6 pm. There were a couple of hundred people in total, earning the minimum wage of US\$115 per month, a substantial sum in Oecusse.

Back at the motel, we met Jose, a project manager from the ZEESM construction project and a friend of Manuel. He, too, was from the east, but had married a woman from Oecusse. She, like him, was descended from a royal lineage. We discussed the ZEESM project and Jose's involvement in the infrastructure rollout. He explained that the key to its success was that it had been working through the traditional governance structures in Oecusse. 'Even high-level political leaders are aware of this need,' he said:

They, too, understand that in order to develop Oecusse you need to know the correct way to enter into discussions, who to negotiate with and who to include. Otherwise nothing will happen.

Jose was clearly proud of his role in nation-building and keen to share with outsiders its success.

He explained a little of the history of Oecusse and how, from his perspective, this history underpinned current local power relations. Hundreds of years ago a foreigner from Malacca (with a Portuguese surname) arrived on its shores and married a local queen. 'Queens had great power then,' he maintained, 'because back then Oecusse society handed down power through the female line.' This royal marriage effectively brought a new powerful 'outsider in' to this society and changed the way of doing things from a matriarchal to patriarchal system. The new king also brought in more outsiders, which in turn much changed the region. These outsiders have all had key roles to play in the development of Oecusse. People from neighbouring islands of Rote and Savu were brought in to teach the locals how to distil palm wine. People from Alor, another nearby island, were brought across to teach people how to fish. People from other parts of West Timor were brought in as foot soldiers.

Jose described the three distinct classes of people in Oecusse today. The local people known as Meto mostly live in the mountains and still closely follow their customs and traditions, often including strict ancestral food prohibitions (e.g. depending on their clan, they may not eat chicken or fish or eels or prawns). The second kind of people are those known in Tetum as *lao rai sira* (travellers), the newcomers from elsewhere in Timor-Leste. These are townspeople. They are the bureaucrats, the teachers, the catechists and the traders (and many of the latter are Timorese-Chinese). Some of these people (including Jose himself) have married into the powerful royal lineages. Third, there is a class known as *kase*—foreigners, usually labourers, fishers and traders from elsewhere in the archipelago. 'It's been this way for a long time,' he said. 'Each class has their own culture and maintains their separate ways of life.' Each group, he added, is now adapting to ZEESM and benefiting in different ways. To get a better understanding of this, he offered to arrange for us to talk to one of his in-laws: the current king of Oecusse.

Photo 10: *Liurai* Antonio da Costa outside his Pante Makasar house (with author).

The house of Antonio da Costa, the *liurai* (king) of Oecusse is further down along the waterfront by the church of Santa Antonio, one of the first churches to be built on the island. The king's simple thatched house is built in a style known as *ume xinas* (Chinese house) and is very different from the style of conical thatched origin houses we had seen in the hills (*ume suba*). *Ume xinas* are built out of rock (or concrete) and *piku* (palm stem panelling) and have a long, narrow, thatched roof. The king told us that the house is a centre for ritual life in the region. Even today, all 18 of Oecusse's villages and associated clan lineages bring their post-harvest offerings here as tribute to the king.

This process was confirmed to us when we returned with our betel nut leaf, candles and rooster to visit Adelina's husband's family at the foot of the mountains. The rooster was sacrificed so they could 'open the door' to the ancestral or 'dark' realm and tell us some of the house's story. The family told us that if they (and the rest of their village) do not come together to take a portion of their rice and corn harvest to the king each year, the annual rains would not come. More than that, the springs would dry up, the crops would fail and the people would become ill. Along with their own household rituals, it was the king's divine connection to the entire

nature spirit world that enabled them to properly communicate with and honour the localised spirits who inhabit their lands and waters. The king is, in effect, the living human embodiment of these custodian spirits. The family explained in detail their traditions and their past and present household struggles. Water was a critical issue for them, and in the dry season their own water source was more than an hour's walk away up hill. As we sat and chatted with the elders by the origin house, the younger men and women prepared the sacrificed chicken for lunch and a woman from the neighbouring house brought over a *tais* scarf she had just finished weaving. She had woven the words ZEESM carefully into its full length in large lettering. It wasn't my style, but I felt compelled to buy it from her.

Despite the ZEESM veneer weaving its ways into local society, it was clear that rural life here—as elsewhere in Timor—is still intimately connected to nature and its spirit realm. On the way back, we stopped at a nearby village to visit the workshop of Rosa and other women skilled in the tradition of handmade earthenware pots. The women in this area are renowned for their pottery skills, with each pot fashioned by hand, smoothed out by river stones, sun-dried, then baked in the coals and ashes of an open fire. They are then taken to be sold at the local market. The women explained the complicated process of acquiring the red clays needed for pot making. They needed to put together money annually to purchase a buffalo, which they would take to the site where the clays were sourced and sacrifice the animal to the nature spirits of the land. They also explained that, after collecting the clay and making the pots, each household must be particularly careful—careful that children not break the pots and that the money earned is spent on household necessities and not wasted. These responsibilities, they said, are a part of their agreement with the land spirits. Pots are provided to them as a household's sustenance, and pots enable them to put their children through school.

Before we left the potters, conversation inevitably turned to current politics. One of the women told us she hoped that Xanana Gusmao would win the next election. 'Only he understands the ways of old and old people's work,' she said. She scoffed at ZEESM and its leadership, saying that it had brought no benefit at all to her or her village. Manuel listened respectfully to the women throughout but was, of course, not pleased to hear this assessment. However, in the car journey on the way back, it was clear that he was somewhat torn in his support for ZEESM. 'The problem is,' he said, 'that the FRETILIN leadership do not know how to *kesi ema* [bind people], to bring people close and win their hearts.'

Photo 11: Rosa making earthenware pots.

As we drove back to town, we passed a pick-up vehicle full of youth campaigning for one of the minor parties. The militants in the back glared at Manuel, and he returned the glare. One of them yelled out indignantly: ‘We are here to support the rice farmers!’ Manuel’s eyes flashed and widened: ‘Go and eat rice forever, then!’ he retorted. Farming was not a part of his vision for Oecusse’s future.

Despite Manuel’s ostensible modernism, on learning about my previous research in Baucau and other parts of the country, he had been very keen to introduce us to what he saw as important aspects of the cultural life of Oecusse. Before we left, he announced that he wanted to take us to meet someone else, someone who would help flesh out this deeper cultural story. So, at Manuel’s instigation, before leaving Oecusse, we met with Paulo,¹ an elderly local historian of towering stature and another descendant of the royal lineage of the ancient kingdoms of Oecusse-Ambeno (a diminished version of which is represented by the current Oecusse-Ambeno special administrative region of Timor-Leste). Paulo was a descendant of the last king of Ambeno, Joao da Cruz, whose centre of power was not at the coast

¹ This name is a pseudonym. Paulo did not want to offend his royal cousins.

but at a large *ume suba* in the mountains. This place is referred to today as 'parliament'. In 1912, Joao da Cruz had been driven out of Oecusse by the Portuguese and fled into Dutch territory where he had lived until his death in 1970. Prior to this, the kingdoms of Oecusse-Ambeno had extended from Soe to the east of Kupang to the Lois River west of Dili in Timor-Leste.

'After the arrival of Portuguese missionaries in Lifau in 1515,' said this descendant of Joao da Cruz, 'other kings became more powerful.' But he was careful to say a close relationship between all the ruling families has been maintained until this day. Nonetheless, he feared that ZEESM tended to presume that Oecusse is empty land. Indeed, he said, this is the very first mistake that they made. 'If they asked first,' he said, 'people would be happy to come to some accommodation with their development plans.' It was their presumption of the right to enter and reorder the world that would in the end, he thought, create obstacles for such initiatives. 'Especially in the mountains,' he told us, 'people still lay their faith in their spirit world.' They are not interested in development programs that try to change their practices and beliefs.

For my part, I left Oecusse a little shell-shocked. We had really only gone there to pass time while we waited for the bees to enter Lookou. Yet, in less than a week, we had learnt so much about this tiny exclave, its history, its present and its possible futures. It was a rich, at times confronting and disorienting, visit. Although I knew we had only scratched the surface, I felt we had been privileged to learn so much in such a short space of time. Despite my own misgivings about ZEESM and its world-making plans, I left hopeful for Oecusse's future. One way or another its people would, I felt, work it out.

In May 2018, much to their surprise, FRETILIN were to lose both the popular vote in Oecusse and their hold on government nationally. To address widespread local concerns over the direction that governance of the territory had taken, the incoming government announced, in late 2018, a proposal to separate the ZEESM economic development program from the everyday administration of Oecusse. A shift of a new sort was underway.

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