3

Back Across the Border

The drive from Pante Makassar along the new coastal road heading east to the border with Indonesia was a little disconcerting. ZEESM billboards flanked the road for its full length, the main function of which was to advise local people that they were no longer allowed to build houses or dig along the coastal zone. The waterfront belonged to the ZEESM authority. People already living in the zone had been told that they would need to move. They were to be given other government land and new cement housing. Land outside the zone on the other side of the new road was already being bought up by private investors. There were plans for resort development. There was even talk of casinos and of international cockfighting rings and horseracing. The clientele was expected to come from elsewhere. 'People from Oecusse will be banned from casinos,' said Manuel. What exactly they would be doing, or where they would be going, was unclear.

We left Oecusse through Wini, the Indonesian town at this main border crossing. On both sides of the border, gleaming, shiny new buildings competed to outdo each other. The Indonesian side was especially impressive. ATMs, duty-free shopping and electronic scanning devices contrasted with the conditions at the tiny border post in the mountains.

Photo 12: Oecusse's main international border.

Upon exiting the immigration building, we were met again by our driver Patrice. As soon as we left the border area, we found ourselves in a small, dusty West Timorese seaside village. We turned inland and headed up a narrow road into a spectacular forested mountain range, broken up here and there by glistening manganese outcrops. On this side of the border the mountainous rural roads were again smooth and paved, if crumbling from washouts in a few critical places. We were travelling this mountainous route on the encouragement of Paulo, the descendant of the former king of Ambeno we had met back in Oecusse town. He had asked us to visit his ancestor's grave on our way back to Kefa.

When we had difficulty locating the gravesite, we stopped at a local administrative office for directions. The stocky official presiding over the office was very formally attired and peered at us a little suspiciously. When he found out that Quin was from Timor-Leste, he immediately relaxed. 'I am from Timor-Leste, too,' he beamed. 'I was pro-autonomy.' By this pronouncement, he meant he voted for integration with Indonesia as an autonomous province, not independence as a separate nation-state. Not quite sure about the implications of this statement, we nonetheless took the opportunity to explain that we were in search of the grave of the king of Ambeno.

Photo 13: Graves of the former king of Ambeno, Joao da Cruz, and his wife, Maria da Cruz.

The official, who had only just arrived in his car, stole a sideways glance at his driver. He made a quick decision and announced that he would drive us to the grave himself. We jumped in the car and he drove us at pace along a winding road for several kilometres. Thinking it was close by, we had left our car behind with Patrice and the kids waiting inside it. Finally, we stopped at a roadside kiosk, where he introduced us to an old man—also a descendant of the royal lineage of the king of Ambeno. We called Patrice and asked him to follow in our car. When they finally arrived, the kiosk owner quickly jumped in his aged jeep, and we followed him down another road full of twists and turns until we reached a small village nestled in the forest. We stopped at one of the village houses. The origin house next to it was much larger than the others we could see in the village. Behind the house we could make out a row of well-tended tombstones. They were the graves of the former king of Ambeno, his wife and assorted relatives.

We were welcomed warmly by the graves' caretaker and his wife. Many other women, men and children from nearby houses soon appeared to join us. They brought out chairs and a table on which they laid a brocaded cloth and offered us sweet coffee and coconut biscuits.

They were obviously delighted that we were visiting, that we were taking an interest in their history and, most significantly, that we had been sent by one of the king's descendants from Oecusse. The villages in this region, they told us, all consider themselves to be subjects of the king of Ambeno. At harvest time, a portion of the corn or rice harvested in each village would be brought to this origin house by the graves as tribute.

While we sipped coffee, we chatted about regional history and politics. The official who had brought us there suddenly chimed in with his own story. He told us that he was also from Oecusse and that he frequently returned there to fulfil his cultural duties at his family's origin house. But he said he couldn't go back there to live, not yet anyway. He declared loudly again with a broad smile and this time a fist punch in the air, that he was pro-autonomy. But this, it turned out, is not the reason why he can't go back.

Most of his family were supporters of FRETILIN in 1974, while at the same time another part of his family were supporters of Apodeti, a pro-Indonesian party. As a result, he had lived for some of his youth in West Timor. Then, when he had returned to live in Oecusse, he had been awarded a government scholarship to study agriculture in Bali. In Bali he became, like Quin, an active member of the East Timorese student resistance movement RENETIL. However, when he finally returned to Oecusse he was promoted to the head of the agriculture department. Landing such a good job, he told us, had persuaded him to a pro-autonomy position in 1999. After the vote, he, like most of Oecusse's population at that time, fled across the border and into these mountains. He had later worked with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, assisting in the task of repatriating Oecusse's refugees, including his own mother and brother. He had wanted to return, but by then he had been given another good job in the Indonesian bureaucracy, so he had decided to stay on the west side of the border. His support for autonomy was pragmatic; it offered him a livelihood and security for his family. When he retired, he concluded, he would return to his homeland in Timor-Leste.

Throughout this extraordinary outpouring of the official's life story, the village people who had gathered around listened quietly and nodded in agreement. This man clearly had their respect as a local administrator and as a man who had to learned to work for both sides to survive. When Quin remarked that it was a shame that people along the border were physically divided, everyone agreed. 'Yes,' they said, 'we are all the same people. We share the same culture and history.'

Indeed, these peoples are so much alike and entwined in each other lives that there is a thriving illegal cross-border movement in the region. People without passports, or without the required documentation to apply for a passport, frequently *liu husi kotuk* (get through around the back) at the border posts. On the main Oecusse border, this process involves paying a small sum of money to an official to be escorted around the edges of the control area. 'Getting through around the back' is an option favoured by many East Timorese students who go to study in Indonesia. A formal border crossing requires that they pay and reapply for expensive three-monthly residency visas once in Indonesia. An informal crossing means they can, for another small sum of money, pay someone to organise them an Indonesian identity card. In these cases, their birthplace will be identified as somewhere just inside the Indonesian side of the border. Then they can stay in Indonesia as long as needed.

There is also a lively illegal cross-border trade in cheap fuel, timber, eggs and cigarettes into Timor-Leste. Meanwhile, cheap imported rice from Timor-Leste is smuggled into Indonesia. For a long time now, the government of Timor-Leste and foreign aid donors have been subsidising imported rice. People from West Timor frequently move across the border (legally or illegally) in search of labouring work. More worryingly, authorities are increasingly concerned that women and girls from Timor-Leste are being trafficked in the other direction into Indonesia.

After taking our leave from the house and the graves, we headed on to the Belu capital of Atambua to visit Balthasar's family and await the traditional honey harvest. In villages to the south-east of Atambua, the border with Fatumean in the Cova Lima municipality of Timor-Leste is clearly visible. Belu people frequently just walk cross the densely forested border to visit family and friends, to carry out ritual activities or to engage in trade both legitimate and contraband. Across this still remote section of the mainland border, a new 'international' highway, known as 'Jalan Jokowi', is being built under the mandate of Indonesia's President Joko Widodo. This planned 'super highway' will soon run the length of the remote mountainous border region. But, so far, it is unsealed and has little traffic aside from Indonesian military vehicles and locals crossing both ways to visit their families, with an 'administration' fee of around US\$5 if they happen upon an Indonesian or Timorese soldier.

In this area of West Timor, people complain bitterly that their cattle are being stolen across the border by hustlers from Fatumean. Fatumean people are historically renowned for their cattle-handling skills. They are said to have magical knowledge and ingenuity that enables them to put a trance on even large herds of cattle. Once entranced, these cattle will simply follow their captors back across the border. While this is referred to as an age-old practice, the people of Belu are increasingly concerned that the illegal trade is enabled by a network of spies infiltrating authorities along the East Timorese side of the border.

Another of Balthasar's brothers, Hiro, is the family's cattle herder. Along with seasonal rice farming, Hiro spends much of his time out in the forested plains with the cattle. Having spent his entire life in these environments, he is impeccably knowledgeable about Lookeu and Fatumea (Fatumean) cultural traditions, about his family's lands and skilled in their agricultural traditions. Like Balthasar, he has never married and enjoys the time he is able to spend herding alone with his thoughts and observations of the area's often fickle tropical ecology. Yet it is increasingly difficult for him to find others willing to assist him with these daily laborious tasks. Unable to sleep at night due to continual worries about cattle theft and other misadventures, Hiro has considered simply selling the herd. Keen to stave off both the hustlers and the end of an era, younger brother Agus has more recently fitted out each member of the herd with a huge melodic cow bell.

Another cross-border problem that continues to affect the people of the Belu region is the 1999 influx of refugees from East Timor. During that period, thousands of people fled across the land border into West Timor. In most cases, people fled with groups of people from their own communities. Many settled down in government refugee camps along the border; others brokered their own arrangements with locals with whom they shared longstanding cultural and family links. While many have now returned to Timor-Leste, many more have stayed on. For some, the fear of reprisals is simply too great to risk returning to their home communities.

In the lowland village where many of Balthasar's family live, the population is around 1,600 people. Of that number, 600 are East Timorese refugees who fled there in 1999. They are known to locals as 'trans' (an abbreviation of transmigrants, although they were never technically part of the Suharto-era government resettlement program). The majority of refugees hailed from one village nestled high in the mountains of central Timor-Leste where the men were once foot soldiers for a feared Indonesian military unit.

The ancestral lands of the Lookeu kingdom spread across both sides of the border. Balthasar's youngest brother, Edmund, was, until recently, head of a village on the outskirts of Atambua. Married to a local school teacher from a neighbouring kingdom, Edmund had been elected in the late 2000s after the villagers decided to reinstate as their leader a son of the last king of Lookeu. Edmund was young and ambitious and, by 2018, he was immersed in the daily to and fro of Atambua region political life, hoping to be elected in 2019 to its district assembly. At the same time, he was deeply cognisant of his cultural responsibilities in living up to his father's legacy. I was coming to understand by this time how each of the Lookeu brothers played their own particular role in fulfilling this collective patrimonial legacy and promise: Balthasar was the cosmopolitan philosopher, Hiro the family's custodian of culture, Niko was the teacher and local intellectual, Agus was the adventurer, while Edmund was an aspiring regional politician. On the other side of the border, in the origin lands of Fatumea, the second eldest of the brothers, Deolindo, remained close by the ancestral Lookeu hearth.

Over dinner one night, Edmund explained to us how the dynamics of village relationships with the refugees from Timor-Leste has played out since 1999. In the beginning, the refugee camps created conflict with locals over land and resource use, specifically deforestation. In more recent years, however, there has been a reinvigoration of customary laws used in the formal governance of the village. He maintained that a major reason for this heightened enthusiasm for customary law was the need to deal with the dual problem of refugees and destructive resource use. Once it had become clear that the refugees were not returning to Timor-Leste anytime soon, customary leaders and others in the village power hierarchy realised that they needed to find a way to accommodate them that would work for both locals and the newcomers. Land conflict had been increasing and people were worried this would break out into communal violence. The leaders turned to customary law drawing on a process referred to in Tetum as *tara bandu* (to hang the prohibition).

Edmund had also arranged for a local *dato* (sub-village or clan head) to come to the house that night so that together they could explain to me their approach to *tara bandu*. I was familiar with the practice in Timor-Leste where, as a style of customary governance, it has undergone a revival in the post-independence period. It involves all parties coming together to carry out a communal sacrifice and to ritually and publicly agree to the terms of a land- and resource-sharing agreement. In this case, the pair explained, the newcomers had been given rights to farm in certain

parts of the village, but not to own land. In addition, they were required to publicly recognise the rights of the current owners of the land. It was understood by both parties that, once this was done, the refugees would be welcomed into the community and allowed to draw from its common resources. To enforce the agreement, the parties would also participate in at least one community-wide ceremony each year. This annual ceremony would renew the commitments of intra-community respect, honour and sharing. Breaches of this agreement would result in fines and further ceremonies to be held at the cost of those at fault.

Edmund, whose relative youth also gave him a certain kind of cachet, explained that another matter that arose was the need to 'be tough with the younger generations', both those from existing communities and the newcomers. With his customary status beyond question, Edmund had begun a no-nonsense campaign to re-engage youth and enforce the return of the underemployed back to agricultural work. He maintained that this hard line had resulted in a renewed appreciation for farming. Meanwhile, the East Timorese refugees who now live permanently in the village made their livelihood from a mixture of market gardening, labouring to plant or harvest other people's rice, and labouring on road and other construction works.

As it was rice harvest season during our visit, we spent time in the fields belonging to Balthasar's brother, Hiro. This year, Hiro had, as usual, employed around 30 of the people who had arrived in the village from Timor-Leste in 1999. They were receiving US\$3.50 per day to harvest his rice. Without explaining the reasons why, most of them told us that they had not yet been able to visit their home village in the central mountains of Timor-Leste. Many had now built 'garden houses', often elaborate replicas of their origin houses (*uma lulik*) alongside their simple village homes.

As with many other East Timorese refugees now living in West Timor, their main origin house remained in their origin community where it is cared for by extended family members, many of whom the refugees had not seen for two decades. A lucky few of Hiro's harvesters had been able to host visits from family members from inside Timor-Leste. They said it was a lot easier to travel in from that direction. They didn't say as much but we guessed that this was because many of the refugee men in this village were ex-Indonesian army soldiers. Now living on Indonesian government pensions, they all said they still think of their homeland. To return might be risky and they would forfeit their military pensions. At least from their new village they could see Timor-Leste.

Photo 14: East Timorese ‘garden house’ in Atambua village.

The customary arrangements that allowed the refugees to stay in the village were not new. They are arrangements modified and adapted though a century or more of cross-border movement. In this village, the relationship between the local Tetum Terik-speaking community (who transfer land patrilocally through their father’s line) and the migrant Bunak-speaking community (who transfer land matrilocally through their mother’s line) is a case in point. A peaceful coexistence between various groups of these different language speakers in the village is enabled by the carving out of separate social spaces, a process referred to as *lulik malu* (a sacred agreement ensuring respect and harmony). In their daily interactions, people from either language group are prohibited through ancestral agreement from getting angry with each other, and from creating conflict or making onerous demands on the other group. If the cattle from one community eat the crops of the other, it is stipulated that there must be an amicable resolution to the conflict. Heated conflict would draw ancestral sanction—even illness or death—for both parties. At the same time, cross-marriage between the two groups is also accommodated, enabled by protocols that ensure the ongoing, respectful negotiation of difficult questions about whether a patrilocal or matrilocal inheritance and landowning system will be adopted—in many cases, these negotiations take place over years, if not generations.

Patrice lived in the Bunak-speaking community of Rai Ikun, whose people had fled in the 1900s from Taroman, a region of the Lookeu kingdom in Portuguese Timor. Rai Ikun people had a *lulik malu* relationship with the people of Lookeu. Patrice's family were not wealthy, but Patrice had inherited his parents' quiet determination and flexible approach to matters of custom and livelihood. They had come to the village from the Cova Lima region of Portuguese Timor in the mid-1970s. Even today, his family's origin house remains there. Patrice's mother was a Tetum Terik-speaker who married a Bunak-speaking man. In his own marriage, Patrice had chosen to marry a Bunak-speaking woman and had become a partial member of her origin house. Patrice and his wife frequently travelled back across the border to carry out ritual business at their respective origin houses.

Such movements back and forth for ritual activities are a common occurrence for both local Tetum Terik-speaking and Bunak-speaking populations in the village. While some have moved a new branch of their origin house into West Timor, others return to East Timor for all house-related business. Even those with a new origin house structure in the village will return to the main house in Timor-Leste for important ritual events.

I was struck by the apparent flexibility surrounding the governance arrangements and people movements along this area of the border. On the Indonesian side of the border, this flexibility is augmented by new administrative laws promulgated in 2016 by President Jokowi. The laws give Indonesian village heads significant powers and autonomy, especially around the regulation of land, water, resources, social relations and livelihoods. Yet, according to Edmund, the situation for the heads of villages in Timor-Leste is much more circumscribed. While customary processes are equally strong on both sides of the border, under Timor-Leste's new village governance system, village heads have, he believed, little to no real power under new national laws and processes and may be seen as puppets of the government. Even though their royal status makes his family the village's logical 'democratic' choice, none of his family on the other side of the border have shown any interest in becoming village heads.

This text is taken from *Island Encounters: Timor-Leste from the outside in*,
by Lisa Palmer, published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National
University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/IE.2021.03