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Small Island Sojourns

In the uneasy quiet of the election's aftermath, we decided to travel to Atauro, a tiny island about an hour's speedboat ride from Dili. The formal election result was not expected for another a week or so, and there remained a chance of trouble in the interim. Some people predicted that, if there were to be disturbances, they would be in Baucau—and we were en route to Baucau. Even though the people we knew in Baucau were not concerned about trouble, we decided to err on the side of caution and spend a few days on an island detour.

As it transpired, vote counting on Atauro had already taken place. The island had fallen by a narrow margin to AMP. Our speedboat arrived on the island at the same time as a large police boat that had come to collect the votes. We heard that militant FRETILIN youth in Dili were so outraged by the result they had vowed to wait at the wharf for returning university students from both Atauro and Oecusse (which also fell to AMP) and to teach these traitors a lesson in loyalty and gratitude. Given that Atauro was the second 'development hub' of the ZEESM project, and the island usually voted FRETILIN, the incumbents had expected to win.

As soon as we alighted from our boat, we heard from villagers of ZEESM's plans (under Mari Alkatiri) to clear the waterfront establishments in the village of Beloi. We were told that, in anticipation of development, a number of national leaders had purchased land in the hills just behind Beloi, even though until recently most hadn't set foot in Atauro for years. The villagers said that Mari Alkatiri's younger brother's company oversaw most of the roadworks and construction on the island, and his involvement seemed to be borne out by the dusty construction company sign we later saw outside a house on the main road.

Photo 24: Women sewing inside Boneca de Atauro.

We alighted from the speedboat near Barry's Place, a lush and homely eco-resort right on the beach and an obvious drawcard for *malae* (foreigners). Our pre-booked accommodation was in what turned out to be the very sleepy main town of Atauro, Vila Maumeta. We made our way there by a three-wheel taxi that sped through the parched coastal landscape on the best dirt road on the island. (There weren't many roads on Atauro and all were unpaved.) Our guesthouse, Manu Kokorek (crowing rooster), took its name from the island's main mountain towering above. Opposite the guesthouse is the Boneca de Atauro (Atauro Dolls), a women's co-operative. We had already seen a film about these soft cloth dolls made by Atauro women, so we were familiar with the business. Our kids owned several of their dolls back in Australia. The next day the co-op was in full swing and humming with around 60 women working slowly, but industriously, on their foot-controlled Singer sewing machines. The dolls come in various colours, all dressed in brightly coloured offcuts of *tais*, with details handsewn by the small groups of women seated on the beachside veranda. Fabrics were strewn around the co-op in various piles, with the inside cupboards full of merchandise awaiting shipment to Dili hotel and airport gift shops. The women worked intently, occasionally breaking out into conversation or hilarity. Most, we learned, walked two

hours each way down the mountainside and then back up just to get to and from work. Yet, despite the hardship of this extended commute on foot, and the cooking, housework and childcare that awaited their return home each day, we could feel their shared pride in this creative small business.

Manu Kokorek and Boneca de Atauro, and a range of other small businesses mainly run by women, were established after independence with the help of two Italian priests, both of whom had previously worked for decades in Brazil. The women we met told us with pride that the priests had a very hands-off approach—they would show people how to do things once and then leave it to them. In this manner, they had helped to establish a range of co-operatives focused on traditional medicine, sewing, knitting, cooking and jewellery. In the guesthouse where we stayed one of these priests had taught the staff how to make homemade pasta and gnocchi. Italian food was now the specialty of the guesthouse's restaurant. Later in the year, we watched a screening on Timorese television of a Brazilian-made film, *Priests of Atauro*, that documented the activities and passion of these priests on the island.

Despite countless trips to Dili, we were visiting Atauro for the first time. This was an unexpected diversion from our planned onward journey to Baucau and I had no research plans other than checking out the island as a possible alternative site visit for one of my annual university field classes. I had always been interested in finding out more about a story connected to one of the island's springs that I had heard frequently during my research into springs, people and culture in Baucau. However, this was an old, possibly ancient, story, and I did not really expect it to be familiar to people living now on Atauro. People in the eastern coastal village of Wani Uma had told me the story of the 'migration' of one of their springs called Wai Krang. This spring site was now dry in Wani Uma due to an incident in the distant past between feuding brothers. An intra-family conflict had resulted in the older brother excluding the younger ones from a rice harvest ceremony. The ceremony had begun while the younger siblings were pulling their fishing boats ashore. When they looked up at the ridge where their sacred house complex was situated and saw the smoke of the fire billowing up, the younger brothers, knowing that the ceremony had begun without them, decided to leave the region. They packed three dugout boats with goats, chickens and people before visiting

the spring of Wai Krang to ritually collect water in a bamboo length. Then they sailed their cargo-laden boats west until they reached Atauro. There they settled and 'replanted' the waters of Wai Krang to produce a much-needed spring on the largely dry island. I stood on the coral reef shore near our guesthouse and tried to imagine the scene of their arrival. Right next to where I stood, an older man sat staring out to sea on the beach in front of his house, its wide-open doors revealing an altar filled with carefully arranged nautilus and other shells. We exchanged a brief greeting and I would have liked to have opened up a conversation with him, but Quin was back at the guesthouse and I sensed the man wasn't too keen to speak any further with a lone female *malae* wandering the beach with her kids.

Later, I asked Leocadia, the hardworking host of our guesthouse, if she knew this man and the Wai Krang water story. She explained that the man lived there alone and was something of a recluse, rumoured to be captive to the spirit of a deceased lover. To my surprise, Leocadia also knew of the water story. She explained that it belonged to the family of one of the women who worked in the co-operative. We had already planned an afternoon walk with Leocadia to take in the view at the Catholic grotto atop a nearby hill. Leocadia suggested we call in on the family connected to the story on our walk.

My work in Timor often takes such unexpected turns. To arrive in a place with a premeditated research plan is always frustrating and generally not fruitful. In contrast, moving through and within places with an open, meandering approach allows for unexpected encounters and happenings. It is through these events that the specific interests of my research can organically unfold, actively infused as well by the interests and concerns of the people and places I encounter. Of course, this approach provides no certainty, takes time and requires much patience. Timorese people do not usually expect foreigners to be interested in or to be able to understand their deeper cultural concerns. Frequently, it may feel as if not much is happening at all. Then, just as frequently, a rapid-fire range of experiences or conversations will provide dizzying insights and tantalising, but always elusive, details into a range of matters. The process is akin to being swept up in a whirly-whirly, a kind of informational and relational spiral that sweeps in and oversaturates my senses at the same time as providing insights that I know I must try to hold on to. I long too, in these moments, for the calm after the storm and much-needed time and space to reflect.

Photo 25: Quin and Jose.

After the sun's intense heat began to wane, we set off. Along the way, I enquired about a sign on the front of a building along the main road indicating that it was a traditional medicine co-operative. Leocadia said we would stop in at a place selling Atauro medicine further down the road. She took us to the house and introduced us to Maria, a slight, middle-aged woman who had been one of the founders of the traditional medicine co-op. For a number of years I had been researching traditional healing practices and ethnomedicinal knowledge in Baucau, and so I was

very interested to hear more about Maria's practice and experience. On the other hand, I was keen to keep going because I didn't want to miss out on meeting the family with the connections to the spring of Wai Krang. I mentioned this need to keep moving to Quin and, as we rose to take our leave, Leocadia gestured over to Maria's husband. Almost as if it was an aside, she said: 'And this man—well, he is one of your fellow compatriots from Baucau.' Jose was descended from one of the brothers who settled by Wai Krang. He even looked like a younger version of Nai Usu, the angular, sharp-eyed ritual specialist we knew well in Wani Uma.

We explained to Jose our interest in the story of Wai Krang. He confirmed for us that his ancestors did indeed come from Wani Uma (house of the bees) in Baucau. Three brothers came in three boats. He explained that, along with the spring water, they brought with them a knowledge of ceramics, a craft that was until then unknown to the people on Atauro. They also brought with them bees, who made their hives inside that of the brothers' origin house. Impressed by their gifts and new technology, the Atauro owners of this stretch of land gifted the brothers an area of their own. This parcel of land, which stretched in a narrow strip from their landing site on the coast up into the mountains, is still owned by the 'Baucau' clan today. Jose told us of two springs on his land—one is now dry, but the original one the ancestors 'planted' still flows. (The origin house his ancestors constructed by the spring no longer stands. Instead, his clan now have a smaller house closer to the coast where they carry out annual rituals.)

According to Jose, the ancestral connection between Atauro and Wani Uma is widely known on the island. Some time ago, a woman from Atauro married a man from a village in Baucau near Wani Uma and lived there for several years. But contact between families from the two places is *lulik malu* (forbidden): they are banned from close relations; they cannot drink or eat from each other's houses nor can they be involved in each other's rituals. As it turned out, this injunction extended to us. At one point, Jose mentioned that he was a renowned palm wine maker, but when Quin asked if he could try some, Maria interjected to say that there was none left. Later, we found out they were too scared to give it to us.

A similar reaction occurred when we asked if we could go and visit the spring. Maria intervened again in the local language and warned her husband to be careful. Leocadia later explained what Maria had said. 'It's too risky. These people are also from Baucau; they could be related.' Jose diplomatically told us he would take us another time. In fact, he said,

if we wanted to know more about the spring he would need to gather together the representatives of the other brothers' houses to meet with us as well. Only when all three of them were present could they properly talk about such things.

As we walked up the steep and rocky incline behind the village to the Grotto of Our Lady, Leocadia pointed out a tiny thatched structure, like a miniature origin house, perched on the hillside. 'That's the place,' she said, referring to the house where Jose's clan carries out annual rituals. We would later discover that the spring itself was only a couple of hundred metres from the main path up to the grotto, and that Leocadia knew its location, but she had decided during the walk that she was fearful to take us there.

When we returned from the grotto down the hill, Jose was waiting outside his house. He said that he had decided he would accompany us through the village and back towards the coast to show us the site of his ancestor's original boat landing. I presumed he would lead us right down to the beach, but instead we stopped by a large tract of empty scrub on the roadside. As we were by then about 200 metres inland, we were puzzled to learn that we were at the boat-landing site.

Photo 26: Atauro coastline.

Much later I discussed the boat-landing site with one of my Australian colleagues, a physical geographer. Russell Drysdale is a specialist in geomorphology, climate and sea level change. From my description of the site's geography as about a metre above sea level, Russell estimates that the site might have been at sea level around 1,000 years ago. This is our first clue into the period of the brothers' arrival on Atauro, and the relative age of the story I had first heard in Baucau almost 10 years earlier.

Until the Indonesian invasion, the original anchor had been in place at this landing site, but Jose told us that the Indonesians forced the locals to move it and, as a result, it had broken into pieces. But, miraculously, the anchor had reformed as a whole when the pieces were placed inside the tiny origin house up the hill, where it remains. This origin house must be refurbished each dry season. Jose explained a ritual involving the sacrifice of a goat and the calling of the name of Cape Bondura (a powerful ancestral site near Wani Uma in Baucau) to ensure the arrival of the annual rains. I was stunned to hear this. Cape Bondura is also known across the wider Baucau region as the site of the region's most powerful rainmaking ceremony. At Cape Bondura, however, the ceremony has not been done for decades.

Photo 27: Cape Bondura coastline, Baucau.

As we stood by the desolate first landing site, Jose lamented the fact that the area is too *lulik* (potent) to be occupied. The site itself is situated in a residential street, but nobody has dared build anything permanent there. Once a neighbour tried to set up a carpentry business on the site, yet an accident occurred during construction and the man nearly died. Since then, it has remained empty. Jose was trying to find someone (a ritual specialist) to help him move the *lulik* potency of the site further inland, just as they had relocated the anchor at an earlier time. As a descendant of the ancestors who arrived at the site, Jose figured that he should be able to build a house there. 'But right now,' he said, 'I am still looking for a pathway. It is not an easy thing to do.'

Maria told us that the priests had helped set up the co-op. They had brought with them knowledge and seeds of certain medicinal plants from Brazil and had shared these with the group, encouraging them to plant the medicinal plants on the island. Maria said she liked the way that the 'priests gave their knowledge with their hearts; the way they opened their hearts to us'. In contrast, she said: 'Our ancestors, who also had powerful knowledge about plants and medicines, kept it hidden. Anything we found out we were told to keep secret.' The priests instructed her not to *subar* (hide) her medicine anymore—which was why, as she proudly indicated, her medicine was there on display in a lockable cabinet on her front veranda. 'I put it there for all to see,' she said. 'Should people wish to buy some, they can do so.'

When we returned to our guesthouse that evening, we met up again with Maria. This time she had come to visit us, bringing some medicine that Quin had ordered from her and that she had spent several hours making. She showed us carefully how the migraine tonic made from the boiled bark of a tree should be drunk. Standing up, she poured some of the medicine in a cup and showed us how to take small sips, holding the chin at just the right angle while imbibing the medicine. We both noticed that Maria was buzzing with energy. She proceeded to thank us profusely for coming by her house and talking with her, for being interested in her work and for buying her medicine. Maria told us that for the first time in a long time, she had 'come out from under the table'. Even better, she firmly felt as though she had 'found a place at the table'. She went on to say with obvious emotion that, because of our encounter, 'I felt again, for the first time in a very long time, that I was a person; that I was a woman again and I could be proud'.

Photo 28: Maria and her medicine cabinet.

As she talked, we slowly came to understand what she meant. Maria had some time ago ceased working alongside the traditional medicine-making co-operative. She explained that she is a very hard worker who makes and sells a wide range of medicines and who has frequently travelled to Dili to treat people. ‘What’s more, I am brave,’ she said. ‘I have cured many people.’ For this reason, some others in the community were jealous and began to scorn her, blaming her for deaths including in her own family. Since then, she had stopped taking an active role in the co-operative and had withdrawn into her own world.

Across Timor, traditional medicine is a practice associated with the ‘dark’ spirit world or, more pejoratively, in some Christian circles, with the work of the devil. This was a reason why practitioners such as Maria, who clearly had more medicinal knowledge than she had learnt from the priests, was attracted to working in the co-op. To be able to tell others that ‘the priests taught me’ gave practitioners the ability to circumvent the discrimination and prejudices extended to traditional healers. Atauro is known across Timor as a site of powerful medicinal knowledge and practice, and a place with many *matan dook* (those who see far)—healers and sorcerers associated with the ‘dark’ arts of the ancestral and nature spirit realm.

Although Maria was quick to stress to us that she is not a *matan dook*, her experience of community scorn suggested that such accusations are never far from the surface. The church plays an ambivalent role in this domain: it is often the source of the prejudice; at other times it offers practitioners, particularly females, refuge and respite from the very same accusations.

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A few months later, back in Baucau, I had the chance to recount our meeting with Jose and Maria to the village head of Wani Uma and to one of the village's *matan dook*. Under the baking sun, seated in the village head's front yard with a view across the sea, they both listened with great interest to the tale of our encounter. Then the healer got out his notebook (an old pocket diary) and began flicking through it until he found a page with some names he had carefully written down. He read them out. The village head nodded in agreement, confirming the names of the three brothers who left by boat. These names have been preserved in ritual and, more recently, in the notebook to this day. The village head recounted the story to me again. 'The brothers were from the house of Watu Naru,' he said referring to his own house, which is associated closely with Cape Bondura:

They took the water inside the bamboo, as well as a branch of the *sabao* tree. When they planted the water on the island, they also planted the branch of the tree. The tree grew and so the people on Atauro knew that these men had come with clean hearts and intentions.

He corroborated the story Jose had told of the woman from Atauro who had married someone from the next-door village to Wani Uma. One day, said the village head, as she was collecting firewood, she unwittingly entered the area of the Wani Uma origin house complex on the ridge. 'She immediately started having problems with her vision,' he said, 'a sure sign that she had come too close.' He reiterated that the lineages are still forbidden to each other. Talk of repairing relations had been entertained in the past, but in the end it was decided that it was just too complicated.

I was left wondering about the link between the name of the village Wani Uma (house of the bees) and the story I had now heard of the brothers arriving in Atauro with bees. I had been told by another Baucau ritual specialist, Major Ko'o Raku, how, in the beginning, a seven-headed bee

had arrived in the region from across the sea, bringing with it culture and the institution of marriage exchange. Yet the people of Wani Uma had always refused my questions about the significance of bees and it was only on Atauro that I learnt that bees were intimately connected to the origin stories of Wani Uma houses.

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