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New Beginnings

A few days later, I went with the Old Man to another Bercoli ‘repair’ project on the drylands of the plateau. This time the task concerned the rebuilding of a complex of six origin houses that had all been burnt down in the early years of the Indonesian occupation. Much of the houses’ ancestral heirlooms had also been lost in these fires or through subsequent displacements. Now, finally, the families involved had amassed the resources and momentum necessary to rebuild. All six houses would be rebuilt over the coming 12 months. The *hatama ai* (carrying in of the wood) ceremony signalled the formal commencement of the reconstruction.

I had been to many house rebuilding ceremonies, but I was not prepared for the scale of this undertaking. We arrived to find piles and piles of hand-cut and carefully stacked timbers, several hundred metres of stacked grasses and black palm fibres for use in thatching and rope making, countless lengths of bamboo used to construct temporary kitchens and living shelters, stacks of wood for the kitchen fires, huge pots for cooking the rice and stews, and many livestock tethered around the perimeter. Local *microlets* were continually arriving with locally sourced supplies. Some had huge bunches of green bananas tied to their roof. These would later be boiled and used as a high energy snack. Even more impressive were the hundreds of people—house members, their extended families and in-laws—gathered to help with the various activities of the build: to move materials, to make ropes, to cook, to carry water, to slaughter animals, to wash dishes, to serve food, to guard the sacra, to dispense the sacred betel, to sit and talk and bring to life the stories of the houses and, most importantly of all, to carry out exchanges that would carry forward the lives and relationships of all of those attached to these houses. It was awe-inspiring to witness.

Photo 50: Carrying the grasses into the house reconstruction site.

The Old Man was in charge of the operation. Although not technically from the house complex, he was a close cousin from an important and aligned house. He led the discussions around the ritual organisation. His job was to ‘speak’ on behalf of the senior house members, to talk through the obligations and responsibilities of the parties for the rebuild and especially to negotiate their exchanges with their in-law houses. On this day, it appeared that there was little need for extended discussion. All had been prepared and everything was working like clockwork. The people gathered knew, based on their particular relations to the house, what their roles were. The varied tasks involved in the reconstruction were not dissimilar to other life cycle events, although the rebuilding of six sacred houses was clearly a demanding logistical feat. The largest house in the complex was to be rebuilt right on the edge of the plateau to face directly across the valley to the mountains of Matebian. Perched splendidly on the cliffs, this was to be the parent house of the other five ‘child’ houses.

There were around 50 households belonging to these six houses and another 63 houses were associated with the build as in-law houses. The sheer number of people involved, and the requirement that they attend and bring gifts, created a long-term reciprocal burden for the members of the reconstructed house complex. As these in-law houses arrived at the house during the period of reconstruction, they brought with them gifts of buffalo, horses, goats, and ceremonial swords. At crucial points in the future, the hosts would be required to reciprocate with return gifts of pigs, woven cloth, rice, palm wine and other drinks.

Photo 51: The parent house reconstruction site with Matebian mountains in the background.

The reconstruction process had already been underway for three months. The first month had been spent discussing the process, and two months had been spent in the surrounding region collecting the materials, including grasses, palm fibres and timber, and preparing the site. Temporary structures had been constructed to house and feed the throngs of participants. So far, four of the goats brought as gifts by the in-laws had been sacrificed for the grass-collection, along with two buffalo and a horse for the *batama ai* ceremony.

The ceremony involved moving by hand the collected materials from their main storage site to the house complex site a hundred or so metres away. The site was inside the *lulik* zone, a place also peppered with large sacred limestone megaliths. Only those in the appropriate relationships to the house complex were permitted to carry in the materials. A specialist house builder from the local area had been secured to oversee the build, a process that was estimated would take a year or more. Dozens of the house members would remain onsite to assist the specialist. Hundreds more people would reconvene in a year's time to complete the *suku uma*, the final stage of thatching.

The houses were to be constructed only from natural materials, without metal or nails. A critically important job for the large numbers of men gathered was to make the black palm-fibre ropes. Like the relations that bind peoples together, so these ropes would materially bind together and reinforce the structure of the house. The element binding the houses

to the ancestral world was water. The house complex was associated with the nearby spring of Wai Dasu (Dog Water). For all important rituals, the women connected to the house complex would walk the 30 minutes or so to draw spring water for use in the ritual blessings required to enliven and cleanse the houses, their sacred objects and people.

I learnt, however, that there was a crucial gap in the relations and contributions considered necessary to enable the reconstruction. Speaking to the camera, the senior custodian expressed his sadness that one group had not come to the party. A large church-run technical and agricultural college nearby also drew its daily water supply from Wai Dasu. Indeed, the land on which the college was built in the Portuguese colonial period was gifted to the church by this origin house and the associated village. The villagers had even helped build the college itself. I knew, from conversations with the Old Man, that this history was continually invoked by the elders in their discussions over the processes needed to rebuild the house complex. From their perspective, the college should also have been actively contributing to the rebuilding process. Yet when the elders had made a formal request to the college leadership, the priests maintained that they only had resources to help out with the building of churches, not origin houses.

The rebuild was expensive, both in time and resources. Ancestral heirlooms had been lost or looted in the chaos of the Indonesian era and these items must somehow be recovered. House members had been working on this project over many years, searching to find local artisans from whom they could secure replicas. Even so, the process was fraught and time consuming. The recrafted objects needed to be identical to the lost items, details of which were often sketchy. Complicated ritual processes were involved to ensure that the new objects would be correctly inspirited. A sword is not just a sword; it must be infused with the personhood attached to the original object.

After I had filmed the *batama ai* ceremony, a senior house custodian took me to a temporary bamboo shelter that represented the parent house and that contained the rocks of the sacred hearth. Inside sat an elderly woman and her husband who were charged with guarding the amassed objects. The woman explained that it was her job throughout the rebuilding of this house to tend the sacred hearth. Her husband's job was to dispense the betel leaf, at critical junctures, from the house's sacred hearth to all of those participating in the ceremony.

Photo 52: Offerings to the sacra.

The shelter was also a gathering point for other senior house members, including the Old Man. There they chatted, rested, organised, told house histories and other stories from the past. While they sat there, some of their grandchildren would drift in and out. So, too, did the daughters of the house who had married out and whose families were now the bringers of buffalo and horses and swords so essential to the ceremony. Inside, on a raised bamboo platform, were many metal and wooden chests filled with the sacred objects to be distributed between the six houses. The chests contained clothing, *tais*, metal breast plates and headpieces, most of which had been recently acquired. These objects were now, in communication with the ancestral realm, going through a process of inspiring. All food cooked on the sacred hearth would first be placed on plates in front of each of the chests, as offerings to the ancestors of the houses who were now actively re-inspiring the objects.

Below the bamboo platform, there hung 20 or more swords that had been gifted by various in-law houses. These would later be passed to the child houses whose job it was to provide spiritual security to the parent house. There were baskets of *tais* that would be used as return gifts to the in-law houses. A red rooster was tethered permanently by the shelter's entrance, just as each house would eventually have a red rooster permanently at its door. This is *lulik*.

As we sat and chatted, one of the elders began to recount, for the benefit of the camera, one of the founding stories of the house. It was a story of connection between this dryland house and an origin house on the escarpment edge closer to Baucau and the coast. It turned out to be a direct counterpart to one I had heard many years before at the other house. The story involved members of the two houses encountering one another and exchanging knowledge of fire and water, and their ensuing misadventures. In both versions of the story, the defining characteristic of the characters involved was that their mouths were full of hair. According to the now deceased Major Ko'o Raku, this feature indicated that they were *Butu*, a first people of the region who were descended from colonies of termites.

The people of the plateau were pleased when I told them that I had heard the paired version of this story from the house closer to the coast. 'You need to write this all down and bring us back that story and our story in a book,' they said. I asked tentatively if they might not prefer that I bring them the film I was recording. After all, I said, it would contain the images of the elders recounting the story directly in your own words. Yes, of course they said, the film would be nice. But they made it clear, what they really wanted was the book. 'We want to put it in our origin house,' said the senior custodian. 'This will help us to replace the book we lost when our houses were burnt down. That book also contained our history.' On further questioning, it turned out that this burnt book was a book of early twentieth-century tax receipts, much like the book that was lost when the Old Man's Wai Daba house was burnt down. Such books are tangible power objects. In their various manifestations they are used to honour and to prove connections to and responsibilities for a place.

The Old Man had also frequently told me to write a book for him telling the story of Wai Daba and its pivotal role in the Bercoli kingdom. The Wai Daba house is also yet to be rebuilt. When it is, the senior members of the house complex currently being reconstructed said they would be there to 'speak' on his behalf and to reciprocate his services. They will negotiate the law and the exchanges of gifts between the Wai Daba and its in-law houses. 'We are family of sorts with the Old Man,' they tell me. 'When he rebuilds his house, it will be our job to help him build community.'

Quin and I had long been talking with the Old Man about building our own house in Bercoli. Over the years, he had taken us to several sites that he deemed appropriate. Over time, I realised that each of these locations

foregrounded the ‘repair’ of the Wai Daba estate, a house with extensive customary lands and responsibilities, though with relatively few people. The Old Man carefully gave us options, but left the final choice to us. We strongly favoured a site cradled in the valley of the rice fields. After working the harvest, we felt invested in this place. This was also the valley where many of Quin’s ancestors had lived until the Indonesian era had forced people’s habitations closer to the roads. The foundations of their houses still lay crumbling in the undergrowth, and the Old Man constantly recounted their stories whenever we were in the vicinity.

But there was another site that the Old Man was especially keen we visit. To get there, we travelled for two hours by car across the drylands of the plateau and down almost impassable tracks into the far western valley, to the furthest extent of the current Wai Daba estate. This spring-fed valley and its associated savannah landscape was once the beloved pastoral domain of the Old Man’s uncles, prized grasslands where they had grazed their buffalo, cattle and horses. A few people still lived there, although none directly connected to the house. Few grazing animals remained. The spring-fed rice fields belonging to the Wai Daba house in this area had long been abandoned, the terraces now largely reclaimed by the forest.

We visited a family living near the site of the old residence and acting as the area’s caretakers. They kept a few animals and grew some rice. The old woman and her younger brother who lived there made a living digging wild tubers from the ground. These tubers were cut into round chips and sun-dried before being onsold to merchant middlemen. People have told me they end up in China where they are somehow used in cosmetics.

As we travelled through the area with the Old Man and another uncle, Tiu Juliao, people would frequently rush from their tiny thatched houses, calling out to us with tears brimming in their eyes. The tears were for the sight of the Old Man and his brother. That these senior customary figures, people they referred to locally as royalty, had returned to visit meant a great deal to them. The visit was equally meaningful for the two brothers. Both they, and the people who now cared for these lands, expressed their love for the landscape and their sadness about the reforestation that had occurred in the area since the war. In the absence of people and grazing animals, the grasslands had disappeared. Forest was repossessing its space.

Photo 53: The Old Man walking through rice fields.

While the people of the Wai Daba house were no longer present, it was made clear to us that the spirits of the land were sentient. We were told that their ancestral names were still called out by the local people remaining there. The Old Man feared, though, that the Wai Daba spirits were angry that their families were now so far away. He encouraged Quin to buy a tractor so that he could become a sharecropper with the caretakers living on the site. 'Together,' he said, 'we can restore and till these rice fields again.' Tiu Juliao spoke of plans to rebuild a house in the area and restock the herds of cattle and horses. The pull of the remote grasslands was strong, as was the urge to reoccupy it. Besides, leaving land empty is risky; there is no telling how abandoned ancestors will respond.

The fears brought about by wildness and an absence of people were not present back in the valley where we eventually decided to build our house. There, the Wai Daba descendants engaged with the ancestral realm in their daily activities. Even so, we were building a residence in a land that had mostly been vacated of houses. The process of reoccupation needed to be carried out very carefully. Initially, we had wanted to build a traditional style of house with the roof made from black palm fibre. When we suggested this to the Old Man, he obfuscated and appeared to change the subject. He made some reference to the need to first secure

the Wai Daba spring. Later, another of his younger brothers, Tiu Vicente, was more direct. 'Are you mad?' he exclaimed. 'You can't use palm fibres to build anything here until the Wai Daba origin house has been rebuilt. Unless you want us all to die straight away.' Now we understood. The Old Man could not say so much directly, but he was clearly indicating the complication of the unbuilt origin house by the Wai Daba spring. When it finally materialised, this rebuilding process would be done on a grand style befitting the regional importance of the Wai Daba house. But such a process cannot be spoken about openly, at least not by the Old Man. To speak would mean action must immediately follow. To speak and not act would be to invite retribution. So, the Old Man must be seen to hold silent, while at the same time finding subtle ways to inch forward with the complex intra- and inter-house negotiations necessary to bring this reconstruction to fruition. This is a delicate balancing act. The successful completion of the six houses on the plateau was a crucial step. In the meantime, for us to build our house with a traditional palm-fibre thatch would be a grave insult to the ancestors. We hurriedly changed our plans.

While the building of our house would commence in earnest after we had left Timor-Leste, the Old Man needed to consult the ancestors before our departure. They agreed that for the construction we could use water from the paired Wai Daba spring of Ocabai. When the Old Man eventually took us on the walk through the dense spring grove to show us where we could pipe the water, something uncanny occurred. A huge swarm of bees emerged suddenly from the hollow of a large tree by the spring lake where we were standing. 'Stay still,' hissed the Old Man. We froze. I tried to stay calm, remembering how that strategy had worked during honey harvest in Lookeu. Sure enough, the bees dissipated. I was not sure what it would have meant if they had not. The Old Man wouldn't be drawn on the significance of their appearance, but we could feel its power. He told us that once the house was ready, there would need to be a proper ceremony at the spring and a buffalo or goat would need to be offered before we could pipe the water for everyday use. In the meantime, he asked us for US\$10 so he could purchase the rooster that would need to be sacrificed to the land spirits before we could break the soil at the site.

As we prepared to leave Bercoli, we were immersed in the building logistics with a local architect friend and family members. Meanwhile, the Old Man was always out in the fields. True to habit, he would walk around the valley tending to his animals and surveying the area. Yet on these days he was also quietly working on our behalf, organising a range

of other matters associated with the build. This process mainly involved quietly informing and negotiating with various neighbours with whom we would share boundaries or who owned the trees that would need to be felled to build the road in. While he owned the land, many of the fruiting trees belonged to others who would need to be compensated for their loss. A coconut tree could be felled for around US\$15, after which the fruit belonged to the owner and the timber to us. Much of it was used for the internal framing of the house. The Old Man also organised the younger men of the area to collect the rocks for use in the house foundations. I was not sure where these rocks were coming from, but I strongly suspected that there would be a story as to how they were chosen. Two worlds of planning and negotiation were running in parallel.

In building our own house, we were self-consciously integrating ourselves and extending our relations with Quin's living relatives and the ancestral realm. We were no longer simply visiting relatives being shaded by the Wai Daba house. Now, in a very public way, we were rooting ourselves in this place and taking on significant obligations and responsibilities, the extent of which we could neither fully imagine nor control. While the family were quietly disappointed we were not building a high status *uma andar* (concrete two-storey house), everybody appreciated our commitment and it seemed to be the talk of the bi-weekly Bercoli market place. We would not own this land in any Western sense of land tenure. We could build there only because others had authorised it, and because they will continue to negotiate with a whole range of actors on our behalf. Without such negotiation, none of it would have been possible.

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