CHAPTER 17

Displacement and Informal Repatriation in a Rural Timorese Village

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Introduction

On 30 August 1999, a UN-led referendum was held to determine if Timor-Leste (better known then as East Timor) should remain a part of Indonesia or become an independent nation-state. The result was that 78.5 per cent of East Timorese favoured separation from the occupying regime. However, their choice was met with intimidation, violence and forced displacement by members of the Indonesian security forces and pro-integration militia (CAVR 2006: 134). The *Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação de Timor Leste* (CAVR; Timor-Leste Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation) found that the Indonesian military and police were complicit in forming, supporting and funding pro-integration militia groups as early as late 1998 (CAVR 2006: 124). The militia threatened and attacked pro-independence supporters in the months leading up to the ballot, which culminated in the massacres in Dili and Liquisa. Violence broke out again following voting, leading to the torture, mutilation and death of nearly 1,000 East Timorese across the territory. Upon withdrawing from East Timor, the Indonesian military's 'scorched earth' campaign destroyed 70 per cent of existing infrastructure (CAVR 2006: 145). Over half of the population—550,000 people—were displaced during this troubled period, including 250,000 who fled independently out of fear, or were forcibly removed by land, sea and air to Indonesia (Achmad 2003: 193;

CAVR 2006: 145). While a large number of refugees who supported integration with Indonesia have resettled there, a small but steady informal process of repatriation to Timor-Leste carries on.

Among those forcibly displaced into West Timor, part of Indonesia's East Nusa Tenggara province, were residents of Caicua village in Baucau district (see Figure 17.1). Following nearly 13 years of resettlement in Naibonat village in Kupang district, Caicua residents are choosing to return to Timor-Leste. On 23 September 2012, I followed a local East Timorese non-government organisation (NGO), *Fila Hikas Knua* (Working Group to Bring Families Back), to the Mota Ain border crossing post to receive six returnee families (totalling 18 individuals) as they made the long journey towards their origin village of Caicua. In August 2013, I retraced these families in Caicua and carried out in depth interviews to learn about their initial flight and how they were restoring their livelihoods after repatriation. I also took the opportunity to interview other returnees who repatriated through their own means, as well as Caicua residents who did not leave the country in 1999. In this chapter, I highlight the displacement experiences of six returned families and their eventual repatriation to Caicua in 2012 to draw attention to how lives are rebuilt in rural communities that continue to confront the realities of post-conflict society. I argue that in the case of Caicua, repatriation has yet to provide a 'durable solution' in itself, since returnees have received little official recognition and social assistance from the Timor-Leste state. Community-level reconciliation is, moreover, stalled as Caicua residents continue to anticipate the return of their remaining relatives in Naibonat. Notwithstanding the lack of a permanent resolution, translocal circulations established between Caicua and Naibonat challenge the securitisation of the Indonesia-Timor-Leste border and call forth the need to broaden existing notions of 'durable solutions' to displacement.

Figure 17.1 Map of Timor Island showing the districts in Timor-Leste and Kupang, the capital of West Timor.

Source: CartoGIS, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University.

Leaving Caicua

A large proportion of residents in the rice-growing, Wai'mua-speaking coastal village of Caicua in the eastern district of Baucau fled their homes following the announcement of the 1999 ballot results. On 9 September, respondents in this study, fearing a violent backlash, joined family members who worked in some capacity for the Indonesian security forces as they prepared to leave the country. At the time of flight, respondents took only minimal possessions with them. Aderito and his wife, Rita, together with their five-year-old son followed Aderito's brother—an officer in the Indonesian army. Rita recalled the moment of flight: 'I did not know where we were heading. Cuba? Portugal? We did not bring anything. We just went.' They were flown out on military aircraft from Baucau and transported to Kupang district in West Timor. Fear of violence drove people to abandon their homes. An elderly man who worked as a helper for the Indonesian police explained why he chose to leave: '[I] was afraid that's why I ran. Not because of experiencing difficult sorts of things. Not because [I] do not love [East] Timor. [I was] afraid to die. [I had] to hide in order to survive.'

In a study on resettled East Timorese in West Timor, Damaledo (2009: 24) highlights the liminal space occupied by civilian refugees, describing this category of refugees as 'guilty by association' since they were not members of the militia, or the Indonesian army or police, but rather were vulnerable to incrimination by virtue of being closely related to Indonesian loyalists. The remaining residents of Caicua escaped into the hills further inland. The whole community in Caicua was thus affected by forced displacement, even those who did not flee abroad.

The majority of East Timorese refugees were transported across the border into West Timor, where they were sheltered in refugee camps in Kupang, Atambua and selected areas of the Belu district. As the numbers of refugees soared, many people could not be accommodated in the camps, and they resettled in the surrounding areas in the open fields, schools and parishes. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Red Cross, the Catholic and Protestant Churches, and NGOs supported the local provincial government to provide emergency aid relief in the camps. Upon arrival in Kupang, a number of Caicua residents were taken by trucks to the Tuapukan refugee camp. Rosa, a female respondent then aged 12, recalled the dire situation among refugees: 'We lived opposite the Tuapukan Church. Every day we could see the dead being carried past. Maybe five people each day.' At the time of flight, Rosa was separated from her father, who was an Indonesian military officer. While her father joined the troops in Manatuto, Rosa, her mother and her younger brother fled into the hills. They emerged a day later to join her uncle on the flight out of Baucau. They were later reunited with her father in the Tuapukan camp. Some families from Caicua were resettled in *asrama* (Indonesian term meaning 'lodgings') in military stations, where temporary shelters were constructed by the Indonesian military to house the combatants of the 743, 744 and 745 battalions, who mainly originated from Baucau and Lautem districts. A number of respondents resided in an area popularly called Sosia, which was in the vicinity of a youth centre built by the Indonesian Ministry of Social Affairs.

Unsurprisingly, the crowded conditions in the West Timor refugee camps gave rise to severe health issues, starvation and death. Some camps flooded during the rainy season and access to clean water was limited. Moreover, humanitarian agencies and their workers faced security challenges posed by East Timorese militia refugees who obstructed relief efforts for the repatriation of civilian refugees (CAVR 2006: 140; UNHCR 2002: 26). Indeed, some respondents were reluctant to share more details of camp life. Their apprehension hints at the widely reported misinformation, intimidation and violence carried out by fellow militia refugees and community leaders, who subsequently chose to take up Indonesian citizenship.

When official aid relief ceased, most respondents gained access to the state's welfare system—for instance, *Rumah dinas* (public housing) in Naibonat. Their relatives who were Indonesian public servants were moreover entitled to state pension schemes. In subsequent years, the refugees camps were closed, forcing the 'former refugees' to relocate into state resettlement sites or elsewhere independently. In numerous cases, poor accessibility and weak integration with the local community led some to return to the camp areas. To date, over 500 East Timorese households from Baucau and Lautem continue to reside in Naibonat.

Meanwhile in Timor-Leste, Caicua residents who escaped to the relative safety of the hills faced similar hardships. 'We dug for *kombili* [wild yam] in the forest. We didn't carry any food since we had already eaten our harvested rice', a young female respondent explained, recounting her experience of foraging food and living in the forests for nearly two months, before returning to Caicua. Even when residents emerged from the hills, they were too afraid to resume everyday activities. Consequently, food supplies ran short. It was not until 2001 that residents gradually recommenced cultivating their gardens and rice fields.

The UNHCR's Framework for Durable Solutions for Refugees and Persons of Concern (2003) puts forward voluntary repatriation, local integration or resettlement in a third country as a global set of standards to address situations of forced displacement. In accordance with this framework, a formal repatriation program for East Timorese refugees began in October 1999 under the flagship of the UNTAET, and in co-ordination with the UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration, the peacekeeping International Force for East Timor, and the Indonesian security forces. To encourage return, video messages were exchanged between separated families, and family reunions were organised at the border (*Jakarta Post* 5/1/2002). Refugee returns peaked prior to the restoration of national independence of Timor-Leste in May 2002, and ahead of the UN cessation of refugee status for the East Timorese on 31 December 2002. In 2005, official humanitarian assistance from the Indonesian state ended for East Timorese refugees, and these populations were given the opportunity to become new citizens. To date, there are little reliable statistics on the actual size of the resettled population of East Timorese origin who have become Indonesian citizens. Estimates suggest the population to be close to 100,000 in 2010 (see ICG 2011 for more discussion). A decade since the repatriation program ended, there continues to be a small but steady stream of East Timorese who are informally and voluntarily heading back to their former homes.

Returning to Caicua

On 23 September 2012, six families from Caicua were repatriated with the assistance of two humanitarian NGOs. CIS-Timor (Centre for Internally Displaced People's Service) in West Timor has been actively assisting former East Timorese refugees since 1999, while *Fila Hikas Knua* (Working Group to Bring Families Back) was formed in 2010 in Timor-Leste through volunteers coming from the civil society networks. The two organisations have worked collaboratively since 2010 to support Timorese families separated by the '99 conflict. Building on The Frontiers' (an international NGO) messenger programme, which connects dispersed family members affected by conflict through letters and video messages, CIS-Timor and *Fila Hikas Knua* started a voluntary repatriation programme for former East Timorese refugees. Both NGOs work with minimal funding from the Timor-Leste and Indonesian governments. Each repatriation trip can be costly; adding up to US\$3,000 for rental vehicles, fuel and food for returnees and volunteers. Returnees must surrender their Indonesian citizenship, which CIS-Timor takes to the West Timor district and provincial authorities for approval. Correspondingly, *Fila Hikas Knua* requests of the village chiefs in Timor-Leste who receive the returnees to endorse an official statement acknowledging their return and guaranteeing their safety upon reintegration into the village. The repatriation process is thus managed foremost by local level authorities and civil society. To date, over 180 East Timorese have been repatriated through this informal process, and there were plans for nearly 200 people to return after the Indonesian Presidential election in July 2014. There are also undocumented former East Timorese refugees who have returned illegally either through bribing border patrol officers or taking risky paths to evade arrest.

Caicua returnees decided to repatriate after reconnecting with family members through the messenger programme, which encouraged them to make subsequent trips to their origin village. A number of respondents took the opportunity in 2001 to obtain Indonesian passports, which enabled them to travel more freely across the border. The homeward journey for returnees was drawn out over two days; they were accompanied by CIS-Timor as they left Naibonat to travel to Atambua where they stayed overnight in the CIS-Timor office. The following morning, they continued to the border at Mota Ain. At the border crossing, CIS-Timor and *Fila Hikas Knua* managed the immigration process while returnees unloaded their belongings from the first truck onto a second truck that would take them to Caicua. Akin to the day they fled Timor-Leste, returnees had to leave behind most of their belongings and those who had livestock reluctantly sold them prior to moving. Other returnees are known to have taken their livestock illegally to the bordering villages and then picked them up after repatriation.

Due to limited funding, the two NGOs could only hire one truck for each phase of the journey, and returnees were restricted to take only what they deemed necessary.

Respondents cited a number of reasons for deciding to repatriate. These included the desire to reunite with family members; to secure better access to land and resources; and to return to one's birthplace. Jaco, who returned with his wife and four children, highlighted his duty as a son to care for his ageing parents: 'My parents are growing older. They have goats and other livestock. My brother doesn't plan on returning so I chose to.' Jaco's brother, like many retired Indonesian civil servants received a pension and preferred to remain in Naibonat. Abel, a returnee in his 40s, shared a similar story. Abel followed his brother to Kupang where they lived in the 743 battalion lodging before resettling in public housing. Unlike his brother who worked for the Indonesian military, Abel worked as a cook and a tailor when he was not occupied with his garden. He later married a West Timorese woman and now has two children. Abel first returned to Caicua in 2002 to visit his mother, and then again in 2010. He decided to return permanently to be a carer for his ailing mother who died five months after he repatriated.

After residing in the refugee camps and in the 743 and 744 battalion lodging, a number of respondents were given housing assistance by the Indonesian government. Some respondents moved onto private land owned by West Timor residents where they paid rent or were given access to land in kind through established social ties. The neighbourhood of Naibonat began to re-emplace the origin community of Caicua among other refugee communities as families and friends clustered near one another—particularly social groups originating from the eastern districts of Timor-Leste. Jaco and other respondents described everyday life in Naibonat as resembling Caicua, 'even the environment, the flat land, and the climate were similar', they stressed. They engaged in subsistence agriculture: cultivating gardens and rice paddies, rearing livestock, and relying heavily on the land as the primary source of livelihood. The only difference, they contended, was that they had access to smaller parcels of land (typically less than one hectare) and they were residing on someone else's land. As one respondent described, 'our livelihoods were the same in Naibonat. We eat from the land. But over there we were not living on our land. We are free now living on our land.'

Respondents further highlighted some tensions with local landowners that resulted in poor integration in Naibonat. Rosa was quick to acknowledge that the newly arrived East Timorese refugees were partly at fault: 'oh, we had troubles everyday! [East] Timor wants something, [East] Timor will get it.' When asked why the West Timorese were fearful of the East Timorese, Rosa continued, 'you know, we left here because of a crisis. So when we arrived, they knew our

attitudes (*jeitu*). Some [East Timorese] killed people's animals, and they [West Timorese] couldn't raise their voice. There were too many of us.' Indeed, as reported in the media, the large influx of East Timorese migrants often provoked tension and conflict with local residents particularly concerning land access (see, for example, IRIN News 2010).

At the time of their repatriation, in 2012, *Fila Hikas Knua* provided food rations for Caicua returnees. This was supplemented by food rations from the Timor-Leste Ministry of Social Solidarity (MSS), which included two *karong* of rice (approximately 15 kilograms) for each individual. Returnees were told that MSS would return in the several months to replenish food rations, but this had not eventuated a year later when I was in residence in Caicua. The village chief of Caicua, together with the relatives of returnees, were central in helping to rebuild returnees' livelihoods. As the food supplies diminished, the village chief, who is also a member of kin, bought returnees more household provisions. While returnees were in West Timor, their relatives looked after their land and properties in Caicua. Upon return, respondents began to cultivate gardens and rice paddies on family land, however, most of them were still reliant on their kin group for food and economic assistance during the first year. The village chief moreover assisted returnees to obtain Timor-Leste electoral and identification cards. A number of individuals and families returned in the previous years from West Timor through their own means. Similarly, they received no state assistance and turned to their kin networks to rebuild livelihoods.

The dead are also among those repatriated. In 2012, the six returnee families brought with them a small coffin containing the corpse of an elderly man who passed away in Naibonat in 2009. His body was exhumed to be reburied in Caicua—his birthplace—in accordance to Wai'mua mortuary ritual practice. Respondents explained that there were more bodies to come across the border, however, their return must be preceded by staged negotiations and payment exchanges within the kin and affinal groups, which was a difficult feat to organise among the geographically dispersed families. As Senhor Supriano, A former FALINTIL (*Forças Armadas da Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste*; Armed Forces for the National Liberation of East Timor) combatant elaborated: 'my brother-in-law is buried there. His family [residing in Naibonat] refuse to hand [him] over.' The village chief suggested that they might exhume and repatriate all the bodies of Caicua residents in West Timor in one occasion in order to save costs on logistics.

Caicua–Naibonat flows

Between 30 and 60 former residents of Caicua remain in Indonesia. Some individuals have married local West Timor residents, while others have married fellow East Timorese who were also displaced in 1999. Still others have migrated elsewhere in Indonesia. However, there is a sustained movement of people, goods, money and information between Indonesia and Timor-Leste, more specifically, a circulation between the two localities of Naibonat and Caicua. Family relatives from Naibonat may stay up to two weeks or a month in Caicua, while visitors from Caicua who travel across the border stay a similar length of time in Naibonat. Their visits are typically related to marriage or mortuary negotiations. School holidays and the end of agricultural cycles are coupled with visitations between the two sites. These transnational circulations, which can also be described as translocal, have created geographically extended social spaces. These spaces challenge the attempts by the Timor-Leste and Indonesian governments to clearly demarcate and ‘secure’ the border and also raise questions about what constitutes ‘durable solutions’ for displaced populations.

The refugee and forced displacement literatures (with notable exceptions, for example, Wise 2006 and Elmhirst 2012) tend not to adopt a ‘translocal’ perspective, however, I see translocality as a useful analytical framework to problematise the dichotomous notions of thinking of people as either ‘displaced’ or ‘emplaced’. Studies of translocality stress that as people move their affiliations to specific places, along with the social ties embedded in place, may not necessarily diminish but rather become extended, multi-layered and plural (Appadurai 1996; Conradson and McKay 2007; Brickell and Datta 2011). Building on this, paying attention to translocal social relations can cast light on the enduring yet dynamic place-based connections established by returnees, non-returnees and other family members between the resettlement areas and the places of origin.

Since the colonial days, the two halves of Timor Island have had distinct histories despite the populations sharing linguistic and cultural characteristics. West Timor was ruled by the Dutch and East Timor by the Portuguese. With the departure of the Dutch, West Timor became a part of the Republic of Indonesia. When Indonesia proceeded to occupy the eastern half, it kept East Timor as a separate province from East Nusa Tenggara. In spite of security concerns within the occupied territory, border crossing in certain areas, such as Oecussi, became relatively easier. Since the independence of Timor-Leste, the Indonesian and Timor-Leste governments have taken steps to accommodate the high rates of cross-border movement. For instance, in 2002, the long-standing cultural and trade links between the border areas of the two countries were officially recognised under the arrangement on ‘Traditional Border Crossings

and Regulated Markets', which enables residents in the recognised border areas to obtain a Border Crossing Pass permitting free border crossing for 10 days (KBRI 2002).

This official cross-border scheme does not, however, comprise residents who originate from places beyond the recognised border areas, such as Caicua. As such, it is common for Caicua residents who travel to Naibonat, and residents in Naibonat who travel to Caicua, to tread along the 'rat trails' (translated from the Indonesian phrase *jalan tikus* as drawn on extensively by respondents), especially since they cannot afford to apply for a passport and pay the visa fees. One respondent humorously described the perils of crossing the border illegally and fearing capture by border security forces, 'the local landowners don't mind. They actually warn us, "walk quickly otherwise the military will catch you!"' Notwithstanding the political demarcation of national borders, there is much permeability on the ground where local populations on both sides seem empathetic to trespassers.

During social exchanges with non-returnees, returnees and other relatives in Caicua often encouraged them to repatriate. Senhor Supriano relayed that he did not hold any animosity towards his relatives residing in Indonesia, 'we have received those who returned with both hands. Some of us were angry initially, but it has been such a long time. I said to them this is your land, your birthplace.' Those who have not returned were typically benefiting from Indonesian state pension and welfare schemes. To date, formal community-level reconciliation processes/ceremonies have not been initiated in Caicua. Respondents emphasised that this delay was intentional, without everyone present to ensure that individuals' narratives were consistent with one another, there could be potential for misunderstandings to occur. In line with this view, the village chief suggested holding a community-wide reconciliation process only with the presence of all those concerned. The flow of people, material and cultural exchanges between Naibonat and Caicua nonetheless suggest that social division within this community is likely to be minimal.

Conclusion

More than a decade has passed since the East Timorese chose to separate from the occupying powers of Indonesia. Nevertheless, members of the West Timor refugee diaspora (or 'new citizens' as they are now referred to in Indonesia) are continuing to search for long-term stability in their lives. Caicua village is exemplary of the many communities that are overcoming the legacy of the 1999 conflict. Livelihoods and social life among returnees are independently rebuilt with social and economic assistance from NGOs and local kin networks filling

the void left by the Timor-Leste state. At the national level, the Timor-Leste political leaders have publicly encouraged the return of its refugee diaspora, but they have not formally embarked on assisting voluntary repatriation since 2002. The repatriation of former pro-integration leaders and militia members presents a politically sensitive issue, particularly at the local level where disquiet persists among former pro-independence veterans and victims, about the fact that perpetrators of violence and crimes have not been brought to justice. Former civilian refugees are inevitably entangled in these broader politics, perpetuating the vulnerable positions in which they find themselves. They occupy a liminal space where they receive few benefits in Indonesia, but are likely to receive even less state assistance upon repatriation to Timor-Leste. At the international level, East Timorese returnees are technically Indonesian citizens and, as such, they have received little assistance from international humanitarian agencies.

For the community of Caicua, the repatriation of former residents in itself has yet to provide a 'durable solution' to the impacts of the 1999 conflict. Rather, there should be more state assistance provided for returnees in the immediate months following repatriation. There also needs to be recognition of, and allowances made for, the mobility involved in maintaining kinship ties and spiritual commitments between non-returnees in Naibonat and the origin community. The temporal dimension of repatriation must also be acknowledged here since the returnees chose not to repatriate in the early years when official assistance was provided. A related question then is, would returnees' reintegration in Caicua have been any different if they had returned much earlier when 'wounds' were fresh?

As refugees resettle in a second country, the living conditions in their new country or origin country might transform, leading some people to reconsider repatriation. Considering West Timor is situated in one of the poorest Indonesian provinces, along with everyday pressures over land, and unemployment, informal repatriation will likely continue to Timor-Leste if it remains politically stable, and makes progress in social and economic development (ICG 2011). The translocal and transnational circulations between West Timor and Timor-Leste highlight the ability to move across the border as an important mechanism for accessing resources and securing livelihoods for the East Timorese refugee diaspora (cf. van Hear 2006; Long 2010). This demonstrates the need to think more creatively about what constitutes 'durable solutions' and to take into account the dynamism of migrants' lives.

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