



Michael Rose

Indigenous Spirits and Global Aspirations in a Southeast Asian Borderland

Timor-Leste's Oecussi Enclave

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Image 1 Map of Timor-Leste

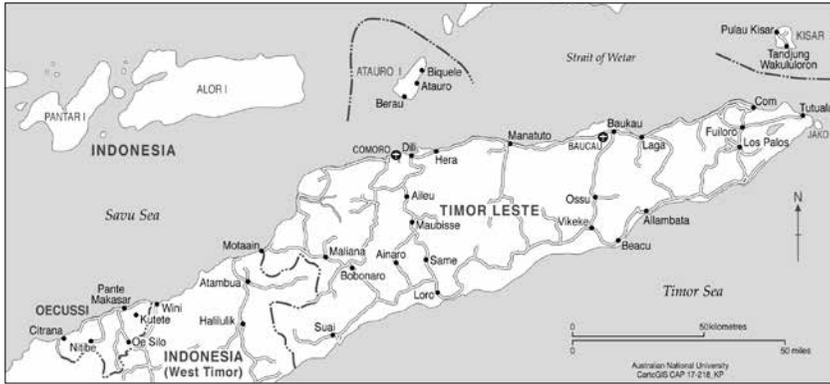


Image 2 Map of Oecussi

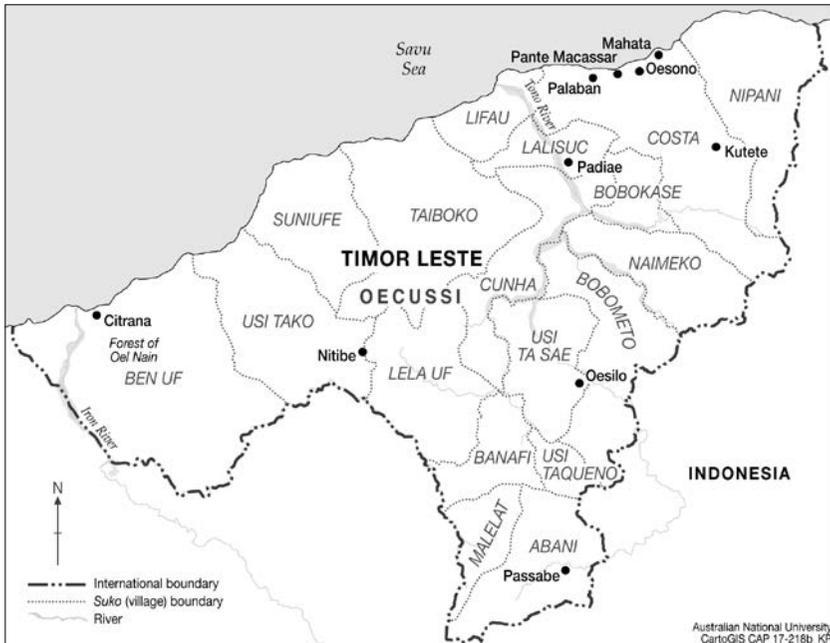
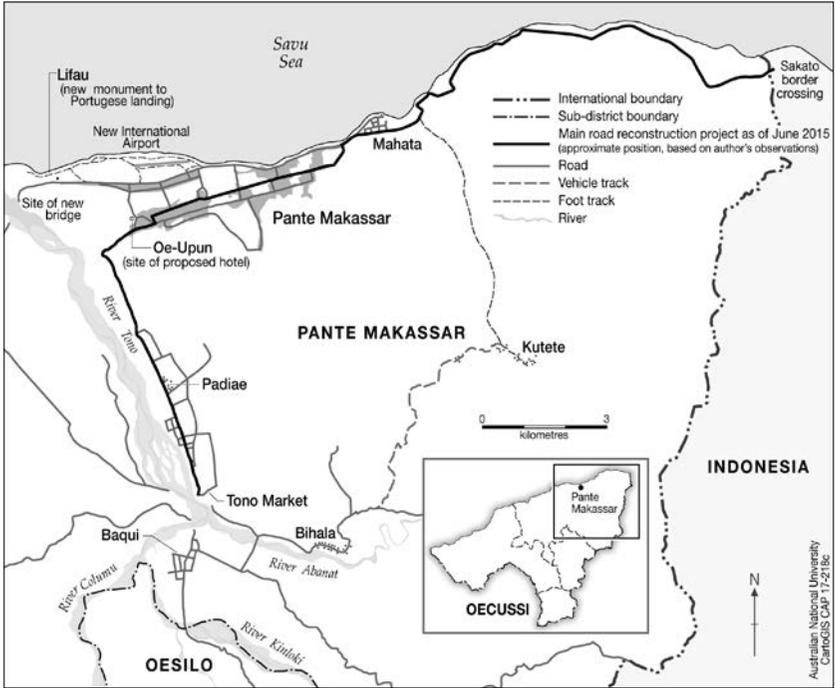


Image 3 Map of Pante Makassar and Kutete





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A note on language

While in Oecussi, I communicated with people through a combination of Timor-Leste's lingua franca, Tetun, and the more difficult and lesser known Meto.

While it was once little spoken in Oecussi, in the 20 years since the end of Indonesian rule Tetun has replaced Bahasa Indonesia as the enclave's language of public life and it is now understood even in remote areas. In the lowlands it is increasingly used as a first language by children with a parent or schoolmates from elsewhere in Timor.

Meto is the main indigenous language of West Timor. The variety spoken in Oecussi is mutually intelligible with the others. It is sometimes referred to in Portuguese-influenced sources as *Lingua Baikeno*, and by Indonesian sources as *Bahasa Dawan*.

Words in Meto have many different forms according to their environment and grammatical functions. One distinctive feature is metathesis, in which the final consonant-vowel sequence of a word changes position in certain situations. Thus, *fafi* (pig) becomes *faif* in a phrase such as *faif ana'* (piglet), or *nenó* (day) becomes *neon* as in *neon mese'* (Monday). Readers will notice this pattern throughout.

Another important feature of Meto is the glottal stop consonant, which is represented with an apostrophe in Meto words throughout. The glottal stop is a full consonant in Meto just like any other and its presence or absence is important. A clear example is *mone* (male) without a final glottal stop but *mone'* (outside) with a final glottal stop. The glottal stop can occur word-initially before other consonants (e.g. *'naek* = big, great) word-medially (e.g. *le'u* = sacred), or word-finally (e.g. *muti'* = white). The only instance in which I do not write the glottal stop is in the word *meto'* (dry, indigenous, familiar), which has a final glottal stop but is written *meto*.

All foreign words are in Meto unless noted otherwise. Tetun words are marked with a 'T'. Indonesian words are marked with an 'I'. Many thanks to star linguist, Owen Edwards, whose work is on nothing less than metathesis in Meto and who kindly assisted me with the Meto language that I have used throughout this text. For more on the linguistics of Meto, see Edwards (2016).





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Linguist Owen Edwards edited the Meto language text throughout for orthographical consistency and provided input on its meaning. Thanks also to OS and Kulu Ana for their advice on the meaning of Meto terms.

The names of some locations, institutions and people throughout have been changed in order to protect the identity of informants and sacred sites.

Portions of the text have also been used in various journal articles. See individual footnotes for details. Thanks for the input from editors and anonymous reviews.

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1 Frontiers imagined, frontiers observed

Abstract

An introduction to the text, setting out the intersecting personal, theoretical, geographical and historical frameworks and narratives within which it is set. It introduces the terms *kase* and *meto*, the indigenous concepts that are at the theoretical heart of the book.

Keywords: narrative ethnography, Timor-Leste, anthropology, Austronesia

My first encounter with Timor was in a freezing church hall in inner-city Melbourne in 1997. I went there as a sixteen-year-old tutor for St. Vincent de Paul's Friday Night School, a programme intended to get over-privileged private school students like me to teach younger kids from refugee families living in the nearby public housing projects. The children we were tutoring were from an assortment of 1990s warzones – Sudan, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka – but the largest group was from a place called East Timor, a tiny half-island the school atlas showed as part of Indonesia.

These Timorese refugees consisted of several large, visibly struggling families who had escaped in the early 1990s and now lived in high-rise public housing; the sort of place where you would regularly find used syringes in the graffiti-clad lifts and the interior hallways were the same slate grey as the winter sky. Timor, I gathered, was a place with mango trees, warm bucket showers, and cockfights, but from a hall in a housing project mired by Melbourne cold and a heroin epidemic, it was very hard to imagine. Even with the island embroiled in the bloody final act of what was to be a 24-year struggle for self-determination, we didn't talk much about their homeland. There were things I was curious about: I had heard that Luis, the boy I was tutoring, had survived the 1991 Santa Cruz massacre¹ by diving into a cesspit and hiding there until dark while Indonesian soldiers looked

1 In November 1991, Indonesian soldiers opened fire on the funeral procession of murdered independence activist Sebastião Gomes, killing around 270 (Rei 2007, 51).

for and executed survivors, but fortunately our supervising teacher² was wise enough to tell us not to bring it up. I remember once, when a car backfired outside the hall, seeing Luis jump like he'd stepped on a live wire. Clearly there were places beyond peaceful Melbourne that demanded understanding, and I came away from Friday Night School eager not only for knowledge about this other world, but also to learn how those who had come from it made sense of mine. It was decades later when I started this book, but all that is to come – the stuff about identity as negotiated through movement between the *kase* (foreign/unfamiliar) and the *meto* (indigenous, dry, upland); the 90,000-odd words of personally inflected academic prose; the energy expended obsessing over a distant corner of a tiny country in the Lesser Sunda Islands – goes back to that time.

Movement and change, the connection between where people are and how they belong, had always fascinated me. The idea that, through resettlement, received conditions could be renegotiated was an exciting one and even the alternative – that some aspects of identity were in fact fixed – had a certain world-weary glamour. Though there was never the opportunity to travel overseas, even in the sun-baked tomato fields 200 kilometres north of Melbourne where I grew up, there were those who were born of far-off places, and on the issue of belonging they were the ones with stories and things to say. To use a word I learned later, there was something liminal about the way they lived, and that was interesting. Three-fingered Joe spoke of his five-fingered, pre-war youth tickling trout³ in the crystalline steams of the long-forgotten Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Efi Porcaro's father was so much still in his Sicilian village that he insisted, as a matter of honour, that his daughter be escorted by her little brother whenever off school property. The family doctor known only as BK, whose real name turned out to be Bhupendra Kumar, who was once heard speaking over the phone to his mother in something that might have been Hindi. These people were certainly all part of my small town by the river, but their way of belonging was rarely easy or taken for granted – their presence hinted at questions to be asked, tales to be told, and secrets to be kept.

Years later, during the height of the Pauline- 'we are in danger of being swamped by Asians'- Hanson hysteria,⁴ I was at school in Melbourne

2 Thanks, Bill.

3 An ancient method of catching trout in shallow, fast-flowing steams by stealthily creeping up behind the fish and gently rubbing its belly to lull it into a trance before flipping the unfortunate creature up onto the riverbank.

4 Pauline Hanson is a right-wing populist politician from northern Australia. Though she has never commanded large-scale electoral support, her tendency to use unusually open racist



with a boy called Harry Lim, whose origins are most easily glossed as Sino-Vietnamese Australian. Racism was all over the news that year, and I was curious enough to ask him whether he had encountered any. He answered, bemused, that he had not, which was reassuring. Years later, after we graduated, he got into the best law school in Melbourne, and then the best government grad programme in Canberra. One night, while out for a well-deserved drink with the other young achievers, some patriotic gentlemen shoved him over and told him to fuck off back home, by which, presumably, they didn't mean the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. He lives in Beijing now, and although he has an Australian passport and a mind full of English, no patriotic Chinese gentlemen has ever physically attacked him and told him where to go.

Those questions about place and belonging I had begun asking amid the tomato fields? It turned out they were serious, and while such reflections may well fall within the realm of anecdote, anecdote is essential to the logic of this book because at the heart of how I have deployed the insights of theorists and fieldworkers such as Jackson, Wacquant, Holmes, and Scott to issues of place and identity, is the question of why setting out to do so became a compelling course of action.

Travel and work overseas was another way of looking for answers and starting to understand the stories of those who had come to my town from far away and had previously been beyond comprehension. I didn't realize this at first; I thought that perhaps all my roaming was just a way to look at things and maybe upset my parents. Motion-sick girlfriends also demanded clarity – why did I insist on spending four weeks trying to get from Beijing to Chennai, or Tehran to Lisbon by train and bus, when plane tickets were so cheap? Did I really have to work on a communistic chicken farm in the Negev? What was so bad about pulling pints in a London pub?

But in moving across the surface of the globe, the unnerving reality of imaginary lines became manifest in a way they could never be viewed from the troposphere, and living on fault-lines political, cultural, and geographic, the energizing and important absurdity of borders became inescapable. In Xinjiang, you could sit on the steppe and see both Chinese and Kazak goats (they look the same). In the blooming desert of southern Israel, you could hear both the *muezzin* from the other side of the fence in overcrowded Gaza, and

rhetoric has allowed her to benefit from a disproportionate amount of media attention. Her notorious 1996 maiden speech to the national parliament, in which she warned that Australia was 'in danger of being swamped by Asians' sparked a long and vociferous national conversation about racism in Australian social and political life.



the weed-whacker whine of the little robot plane waiting above to oversee the speedy death of anyone trying to get across without appropriate paperwork. Borders were more distant in the narrow, smoky streets of Kathmandu, but even so there were shops fronted with signs depicting the Sydney Opera House or the Golden Gate Bridge – brokers who would promise to place customers at prestigious universities in wonderful foreign countries where, even if life wasn't exactly perfect, it was better than in Nepal.⁵

Such experiences revealed more than the quotidian life of checkpoints and their rarely forgotten potential as flashpoints for apocalyptic violence. Also apparent was how manifold and deeply felt borders could be; how essential they were to identities enforced, identities challenged, and identities clung to beyond the limits of reason and life itself. Before travel, borders were mostly about sovereignty, boundaries created by states, and were marked clearly on maps. After travel they were more often about people; manifold lines of the mind which, while perhaps invisible to outsiders, were always implicit in shared webs of meaning that bound and excluded. 'Whether planned or accidental, desired or dreaded,' Jackson (2013b, 2) writes, 'the passage from one place to another, one life stage to another, or one state or status to another, often figures centrally in the stories we tell about our lives and who we are.'

It is this potential of borders, in their broadest sense, to facilitate the transformation of those who travel, that is at the heart of the present study.

A short of history of a small country

Although this is a book concerned with 'borders, in their broadest sense', I pause here before launching into the main part of the text to first provide a brief overview of the big 'H': Historical circumstances that created the international frontiers within which it is set. There is a large and ever-growing literature on the history and politics of Timor-Leste (see Fernandes 2011, Gunn 2011, and Leach 2017, to name a few choice examples) and rather than trying to repeat what others have done so well elsewhere, my aim here is a short account of the making of Timor-Leste that will help readers who are new to the story make sense of what comes next.

5 It would not be going too far to say that my formative reading on the theme of movement as a way of seeking something better, was Theodore Seuss Geisel's 1965 classic, *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew*. Its furry protagonist leaves behind his home in search of the magical city because he has heard that it's a place 'where they never have troubles, or at least very few'.

Timor is one of the Lesser Sunda Islands; part of a string that runs east from Java that includes Bali, Flores, and Sumbawa. Volcanic in origin, it is distinguished by high mountains, porous soils that are ill-suited to intensive agriculture (Fox 1988) and coral reefs that teem with an astounding richness of marine life (White et al. 2014). The island's topography makes for a variety of micro-climates, and although it receives the southern monsoon, its north and west are known for their long dry season and unreliable wet. The people who dominate the island's west call themselves the Atoni Pah Meto, The People of the Dry Land, and often preface the names of their villages with the word *oe*, which means water. The name of the place that is the focus of this book, the Oecussi (*oe* and *kusi*) enclave means waterpot. In this arid land, fresh water is life, and is valued as such.

The first evidence of humans on Timor dates back to around 40,000 years and the present population is a result of the interaction and intermarriage of groups that have continued to arrive since then (Reepmeyer, O'Connor and Brockwell, 2011). Though their origins are not entirely clear, the presence of both Papuan and Austronesian speakers proves that migrations from both language regions occurred at various times (McWilliam 2007d). People lived by gardening and foraging in a land that was sparsely enough populated that conflict or local overpopulation could result in a faction branching off in search of territory of its own, and in this way the island was eventually populated. The oral narratives of the Meto, like other Timorese ethno-linguistic groups, often recall a period of wandering⁶ (*anao-mnemat*) that is probably traceable to this time. The earliest accounts of the island from Chinese and European sources contain little detail about its inhabitants, but do mention that much of it was covered with valuable sandalwood trees, much in demand for its fragrant timber, which eventually drew outsiders to its shores (Fox 1988).

The presence of an independent, officially Lusophone⁷ state in the east of Timor is the most obvious remnant of what was once a much more substantial Portuguese presence throughout Maritime Southeast Asia. Foreigners who study Bahasa Indonesia are often surprised by the number of everyday words that have their origins in Portuguese. Table is *meja* (P: mesa), party is *pesta* (P: *fešta*) and violin is *biola* (P: viola). Portugal was the

6 See McWilliam's (2002) *Paths of Origin, Gates of Life*.

7 See Caffery, Coronado, Hodge and Taylor-Leech (2014, 3). Timor's two official languages are Portuguese and Tetun, with Tetun having now fully emerged as the dominant language of daily life, government, commerce and public discourse. Indonesian and English are sometimes used by businesses, media and NGOs.



first European power to establish itself in the Indonesian archipelago during the 16th century and the influence of their language on Malay as it was spoken in its ports and markets is testament to the role of the missionaries and merchants that came with it (Teixeira 1962).

Hägerdal (2012), arguably the preeminent historian of this period, describes how Portuguese, mostly pursuing spices, sandalwood and souls, arrived in the area in the early 1500s, soon after pioneering the sea route to India, and quickly established an influential network of alliances and strategic outposts spanning from Malacca on the Malay peninsula to the Moluccas just off New Guinea. By the early 17th century their realm had begun a slow decline – its constituent parts acquired by the rival Dutch and British, breaking away in rebellions or just falling into neglect. The islands of what is today Indonesia came under the sway of the Dutch, and in 1859 when Portugal was forced by financial insolvency to cede to them Flores and Solar, Portugal's once expansive presence in the archipelago was reduced largely to the eastern half of the island of Timor (Molnar 2010, 32).

Portuguese sovereignty in Timor was never as settled or consistent as suggested by colonial era maps. It was mediated by shifting alliances with local kingdoms and competition with the Dutch, with the extent of the territory which they claimed as their own at any given time depending on the loyalties of local rulers and imperial negotiations in faraway Europe where parcels of land were exchanged and frontiers moved and contested. Given the lives that have been lost fighting over them in the past 100 years (see Arthur 2019 on the concept of *mate bandeira hun*, 'dying at the base of the flag', in Timorese political discourse) it is sobering to reflect that it was only in 1914 that the current borders were finally settled by a decision of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague (Sowash 1948, 232).

Despite the centuries of bloody feuding over its extent, from a colonial perspective Portuguese Timor was distinguished mostly by being poor and out of the way. As Peake (2013, 19-20) vividly puts it in his 2013 classic, *Beloved Land: Stories, Struggles and Secrets from Timor-Leste*, Portuguese territorial claims to Timor 'reflected their aspirations on the map rather than the facts on the ground'. He cites a despairing governor, who in 1879 wrote to his superiors lamenting his difficult lot. 'I have a total of forty-eight Civil and Military officers, of which ten are competent, ten are mediocre, and seventeen are useless.' Still, although lacking in scope and effectiveness, over the course of centuries Portuguese policies were different enough from those promulgated by the Dutch in their part of Timor to sow the



seeds that would eventually sprout into a distinct national identity and an independent state.

The influence of Portuguese rule in shaping Timor-Leste's linguistic situation was particularly significant in this regard. In the islands of the Netherland's East Indies, Dutch administrators adopted Malay as a medium of governance. Because of this, for all its many serious internal divisions, when the sprawling colony eventually became the Republic of Indonesia in 1945 it already had a common working language (standardized as Bahasa Indonesia) that would become key to a complicated but encompassing national identity, in which the people of Portuguese Timor pointedly did not share. Although Malay did have some history as a trade language in coastal Timor, from the latter part of the 18th century, it was a Portuguese-influenced variant of a Timorese language, Tetun, that came to serve as the primary means of spoken communication between its sixteen ethno-linguistic groups⁸ (Williams-Van Klinken and Hajek, 2018). Like Indonesian, Tetun is an Austronesian language, but despite some overlap in vocabulary and grammar, they are not mutually intelligible. And although a shared language doesn't necessarily make for a common national destiny, this linguistic difference, which persists to this day, has strengthened Timor-Leste's sense of being distinct from its neighbour.

In Timor, unlike in Lisbon's African colonies, Portuguese was never adopted as a spoken language by the population at large. Though it was used for educational and administrative purposes, most of its people rarely had cause to visit a school or a government post. Portugal was small, its empire spanned the globe and, especially compared to its colonies in Africa, tiny Timor was resource poor and not a priority. By the 1860s, coffee had replaced sandalwood as the colony's most significant export, but the profits were still insignificant compared with those to be had in Portugal's other territories (McWilliam and Shepherd 2013). In stark contrast to many parts of the Netherlands East Indies, cash cropping and plantation agriculture never became dominant, and outside the capital of Dili and a few areas connected to it by road, life revolved around swidden gardening. After Timor was invaded by Indonesia in 1975, the nationalist front that eventually emerged to lead the struggle for freedom called itself the National Council for Maubere Resistance (*Conselho*

8 The exact number of indigenous languages spoken in Timor-Leste is a matter of some conjecture, the issue being complicated by a paucity of systematic research and unclear definitions of what constitutes a language as opposed to a dialect. The figure I have cited here is from Hull (2002, 381).

Nacional da Resistência Maubere)⁹ – Maubere being a Timorese (specifically a Mambai¹⁰) word appropriated as a pejorative by the Portuguese to refer to the agriculturalists of the highlands, but reclaimed by the early nationalists as emblematic of the indigenous spirit that defined them and sustained their quest for national self-determination (Ramos-Horta 1987, 37).

In the dramatic year of 1975, with Portuguese colonial rule collapsing and his country facing a highly uncertain future, the man who would eventually become the leader of Timor-Leste's independence movement, Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão (1975, cited in Gusmão & Niner 2000, 35), wrote a poem expressing the spirit of the term:

Maubere People,
clench your fists,
The hour is yours, Maubere!
And your defiance will bring down
the walls of your own enslavement!

Another aspect of Portuguese rule that proved to be important in the emergence of Timor-Leste as a distinct polity, was the privileged position it accorded to Catholicism. In contrast to the complex situation in the neighbouring Netherlands East Indies/Indonesia¹¹, where the Dutch officially endorsed a number of major religions, in Portuguese Timor Catholicism was the only outside faith allowed to spread¹² and was closely associated with the colonial state. For local rulers who wanted to ally with the Portuguese or individuals who sought to work as colonial functionaries, being baptized was important. Throughout the Portuguese period, local religious practices (sometimes glossed in modern-day Tetun as 'the rock and the tree', T: *fatuno ai*) remained the dominant form of spiritual observance, although the Church's influence, especially through running schools, was significant. In the 1960s and 1970s, former seminarians living in Dili would be critical in building the intellectual foundation of what would eventually become Timor-Leste.

9 See Cotton (2000, 2-6).

10 Mambai is the second-biggest indigenous language in Timor (after Meto), spoken across a swath of mountainous country stretching south from the hills outside Dili to the coast.

11 Aritonang & Steenbrink (2008) provide an excellent overview of this.

12 Under the Portuguese, there were also very small Protestant and Islamic communities. Protestantism centred on the island of Atauro, where it was brought by Dutch missionaries. The Islamic community consisted mostly of the descendants of Arab traders who had settled in Dili.

For all its complexities, Timor-Leste's 1975-1999 fight against Indonesian occupation was fundamentally an existential struggle to preserve the distinct identity that emerged as a result of this long encounter between the indigenous people of Timor and the Portuguese Empire. The identity was Catholic, or at least Catholic influenced, but also encompassed an understanding that the land was inhabited by ancestral and elemental spirits in a way that made matters of geography, history, family, and personal fortune impossible to distinguish. It valued the continued role of the Portuguese language, if only through Tetun, and rejected the hegemony (although not the utility) of Bahasa Indonesia. It recognized the importance of economic development, but not over the imperative for self-determination.

In 1974-1975, after more than 500 years of existence, the Portuguese empire unexpectedly and definitively came to an end. On 25 April 1974, weary of being sent to die in colonial wars that consumed much of the national budget, a left-wing faction from within Portugal's armed forces toppled the government and quickly declared that Portugal's colonies would be left to go their own way (Ferreira and Marshall, 1986). At the time Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea Bissau were embroiled in bitter independence struggles, but in far-off Timor-Leste the situation was peaceful. Although there had been an armed rebellion as recently as 1959, in 1973 the small circle of young people in Dili who were talking about independence were thinking more about the possibility of a managed transition over a number of years than physical confrontation (Ramos-Horta 1987). The realization that Portugal would be leaving soon, quite possibly without a meaningful period of preparation, spurred the formation of the colony's first political parties. The largest of these, FRETILIN¹³, was a left-wing movement who advocated for social revolution and a clean break with the colonial past. Its smaller rival, UDT¹⁴, advocated a more conservative approach, including an ongoing relationship with the former colonial power. By August 1975, after a failed attempt at working together ended in an unsuccessful UDT coup, the tiny nation-in-waiting found itself unexpectedly embroiled in a small but vicious civil war (Hoadly 1976).

By the time the fighting ended in September, FRETILIN was in control of the country and what was left of the Portuguese administration had evacuated to the island of Atauro, from where, in December, they would depart forever. As with many of Timor's wars the death toll is unclear – estimates

13 *Frente Revolucionaria de Timor-Leste Independente*/Revolutionary Front of Independent East Timor.

14 *Uniao Democratica Timorese*/The Timorese Democratic Union.



range between 1500 and 3000 (Fernandes, 2012). But despite the restoration of calm domestically, FRETILIN understood that their position was precarious. Important figures within Indonesia's security apparatus and army were pushing for an invasion, and the ascendancy of a left-wing movement, an anathema to both Jakarta's military-dominated *Orde Baru* (New Order) and its Western backers, swung the argument their way. That this was the same regime that had marked its ascent to power by orchestrating the massacre of half a million people accused of being communists¹⁵ (Melvin 2018) underscored just how serious the situation was. On 28 November 1975, conceding that the Portuguese were not going to return to help manage an orderly decolonization, and that an Indonesian invasion was likely imminent, FRETILIN unilaterally declared the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste.

The Indonesian invasion started in earnest two weeks later, with troops pouring in by land, sea, and air. The rugged terrain of Timor-Leste proved ideally suited to defensive warfare. FRETILIN, despite being vastly outnumbered, was able to hold and administer an ever-shrinking 'free zone' until the end of 1978. The fighting was characterized by overwhelming brutality on the part of the Indonesian Army (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia*, or TNI) and included deliberately induced starvation, the use of aerial bombing (including napalm, cluster bombs and the spraying of defoliants) and the forced resettlement of villages so as to cut the resistance off from any possible support (Fernandes 2015). Working from a range of Portuguese, Indonesian and Church sources, Kiernan (2003) estimates the war caused around 170,000 deaths over its most intense years in the late 1970s and early 1980s – that is to say some 25 per cent of the pre-war population – the majority being civilians who died of disease and starvation. Using data from Indonesia's Sejora Monument to its war dead, Van Klinken (2005, 121) estimates there were also around 3600 Indonesian combat fatalities, the majority of them also in this period.

Especially throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the military aspect of the occupation ran in parallel with an effort to integrate what Jakarta referred to as *Provinsi Timor Timur* through what was somewhat euphemistically referred to as 'development' (I: *pengembangan*). Hamlets were relocated from remote areas down to newly built roads, where they would not only have access to services such as electricity and piped water but could also be watched closely by the police and army. Schools were built that sought

15 An older man I often spoke to in Oecussi had been a member of FRETILIN at the time and was arrested soon after the invasion. He recalled how his captors insisted he admit to being part of the defunct Indonesian Communist Party and viciously beat him when he refused.

to both promote literacy and indoctrinate a new generation of Timorese children as loyal Indonesian citizens. Family planning initiatives were perceived as intended specifically to reduce the indigenous population (Wallace 2014, 16). In short, there was no clear line between attempts to 'develop' 'Tim Tim' and control its population (Sherlock 1996). Commenting on the argument that its ungrateful people were eating up more than their fair share of the national economy, in the mid-1990s eminent Indonesian economist Hadi Soesastro (cited in Sherlock 1996, 836) argued that the expense was justified. 'Development was the key to solving the East Timor Problem,' he wrote, 'the principal instrument for integrating East Timor into Indonesia, economically as well as politically'.

Although the fiction that the brutal occupation was actually a 'return to lap of mother Indonesia' (Soekanto 1976, preface) never gained widespread credibility, the imposition and eventual adoption of Indonesian logics of governance and development did shape Timor-Leste in ways that continue to be important.

Of particularly lasting impact was Jakarta's inadvertent role in transforming Catholicism from a faith with which only a minority of the population was formally affiliated¹⁶ to one that is almost ubiquitous. Under Indonesian law every adult citizen must carry an ID card that includes, along with other information, their religious affiliation.¹⁷ From being present but peripheral to the lives of most, the Church quickly became central to most aspects of Timor-Leste's social and political existence. Compelled to abandon Portuguese as the language of its liturgy, the Church requested and received special dispensation from the Vatican to use Tetun rather than Indonesian instead, effectively making what had once been a utilitarian *lingua franca* into a national language in waiting. At a time when the rest of the world seemed to have forsaken them, the Church was steadfast in standing by the people of Timor, an ever-present organization with a voice that could not be ignored both domestically and abroad (Hodge 2013).

The increasing influence of Catholicism went hand in hand with a suite of reforms that aped those enacted throughout Indonesia decades before. Villages were administratively reorganized as well as physically relocated (Hoadly 1976), with customary authority of local kings (T: *liurai*) replaced by that of a *kepala desa* (village head) who were part of an (admittedly leaky) pipeline of authority and money that went all the way back to Jakarta. The locus of daily governance and spiritual life, once situated in the autonomous

16 Hodge (2013) estimates no more than 30 per cent.

17 The choices are Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism or Confucianism.

highlands, shifted to the *kantor* (I: office) and *gereja* (I: church) along the newly built roads. In this way it was under Indonesia that most people in Timor-Leste had their first and formative experiences of formal education, central governance, church-based worship, and the cash economy. Although Timorese continued to largely reject the Indonesian state, as the occupation wore on they did start to become habituated to and even embrace aspects of what might fairly be described as an Indonesian lifestyle. This is still very much evident today. Throughout this book one of my main concerns is to show in detail how, in Oecussi district, both modes of life (described by my informants as *kase* [foreign] and *meto* [indigenous]) continue to exist and interact.

In 1989 the situation in 'Tim Tim' was declared 'normalized' and the area was opened to foreign visitors and Indonesians alike, but the pretence fooled no one (van Klinken 2005, 114). After the last of their bases was overrun at the end of the 1970s, the armed resistance had reinvented itself as mobile guerrillas, few in number but almost impossible to wipe out completely. They were supported by a growing network of sympathizers in the towns, the *frente klandistina*. People tell stories of how four-year-olds were coached to toddle up to Javanese policemen and ask them '*Kapan kamu pulang?*' (I: 'When are you going home?'). Timorese youth on scholarships in Indonesia, far from being won over, held nationalist meetings and raised their flag. Throughout the world, but especially in Portugal and Australia, Timor-Leste's exiles and supporters continued to advocate for the cause, with regular pickets out the front of Indonesian consulates. Beyond Timor, however, the cause was rarely one that compelled the attention of the public and there were times when things seemed hopeless.

Like that of the Portuguese, the end of the Indonesian empire in Timor-Leste was sudden and violent. The massacre that my friend Luis survived on 12 November 1991 at Santa Cruz Cemetery in Dili was a turning point. There had been massacres before, as mentioned above. One way or another perhaps a quarter of the population died due to the invasion, but this time there were around ten foreign activists and journalists present, their cameras rolling. One, a student journalist from New Zealand, was shot and killed but another managed to hide his film in a grave before his equipment was seized. It was later retrieved and smuggled out (Braithwaite, Charlesworth, Soares 2012, 79-84). Current Indonesian defence minister, Prabowo Subianto, a high-ranking military officer with a long, brutal history of service in Timor¹⁸ was quite upset by the PR implications. 'You don't massacre civilians

18 See van Klinken (2014).



in front of the world press,' he told a journalist. 'Maybe commanders do it in villages where no one will ever know, but not in the provincial capital [...] It killed us politically, it was the defeat' (Nairn 2014). And yet, it was unclear at first that even such graphic evidence of what was going on in Timor would make a difference. Certainly the horrifying images did spark a surge in international support for Timor-Leste's cause, but not enough to have an appreciable effect on Indonesian policy. The Australian foreign minister Gareth Evans¹⁹, a supporter of Indonesia's presence, wrote the incident off as an 'aberration'. A year later the leader of the resistance, Xanana Gusmão, was arrested and sentenced to 20 years in prison. But just as he had done when hiding in the jungle, many of the letters and tapes he had smuggled from his prison cell were signed off with the slogan 'to resist is to win' (Gusmão & Niner 2000).

For Timor-Leste, 1998 was the year when, as Pat Walsh (2019), memorably paraphrasing Irish poet Seamus Heaney, put it: 'hope and history rhymed'. A financial panic that began in Thailand quickly spread across the region, including to Indonesia where it led to hyperinflation, rioting, and the end of President Suharto's 33 years of iron-fisted rule. That December, seeing the change as an opportunity to address the festering issue of Timor-Leste, Australia's Prime Minister John Howard wrote to Suharto's successor, B.J. Habibie. In his letter Prime Minister Howard reiterated his support for Indonesian control of Timor-Leste, but suggested that the issue needed to be addressed. He cited the French approach to New Caledonia, in which the colony was granted a decade-long autonomy package replete with generous aid and political concessions followed by a confirmatory referendum in which independence was an option, as a potential model. Irritated by the comparison of his republic (founded in a fiery surge of anti-colonial rhetoric) to a European imperial power, Habibie surprised everyone by quickly moving to organize a UN-supervised 'popular consultation' on independence scheduled not for a decade hence, but for 30 August 1999 (Braithwaite, Charlesworth, Soares 2012, 91-94).

The months leading up to the vote were fraught. Unhappy with the decision of their interim president and operating at a time of disorientating political uncertainty in their own country, the Indonesian army started to sponsor and train a number of pro-independence militia groups. Even with the arrival of international election monitors, including a contingent

19 In 2017 the same man, serving as the Vice-Chancellor of ANU, handed me my PhD. 'Dr. Rose, that sounds all right now, doesn't it?' he said as he shook my hand. I had some notion of responding with something snide, but in the end just gratefully accepted the diploma.

of unarmed police, campaigning was marred by ongoing violence by militia, including the massacre of as many as 60 people at a church in the town of Liquisa in April (Kent 2008, 16). If the intimidation was intended to keep people away from the polling booths or coerce them into voting against independence, it failed. There was an almost full turnout, and 78.5 per cent of people voted for independence. The people of Timor-Leste had expressed their will.

The systematic campaign of murder and arson that followed the announcement of the poll results is sometimes described as a rampage, although it is clear that much of it was carefully planned and facilitated by elements within the Indonesian armed forces (Nevins, 2005). While President Habibie had committed to maintaining security in the lead-up to and after the ballot and its aftermath, clearly many of his soldiers disagreed with him and did nothing to stop the militia they had created in their reign of terror. It was only through intense international pressure and a final burst of lobbying on the part of Timor-Leste's exiled leaders that Indonesia allowed an Australian-led peacekeeping force to deploy. Arriving in Dili on 20 September 1999, they slowly spread out through the rest of the country, finally reaching Oecussi a month later. By the time calm had been restored, the population had been displaced (250,000 of them externally to Indonesia) the buildings torched, the livestock slaughtered or stolen, and 1400 people killed (Robinson 2003). Formal independence wouldn't arrive until May 2002, but after 500 years Timor-Leste, liberated from those who would tell them who they were and how to live, was free to find its own path.

Having secured its external boundaries, Timor-Leste could now turn to the task of contemplating the frontiers within.

Life between lines: an outline of Oecussi

It is telling that perhaps the best-known novel of Timor-Leste is entitled *The Crossing*. Exiled in Portugal, Luis Cardoso (2002) writes of Timorese life as being defined by movement and dislocation, and while the book is mostly set in the 1960s, its tale of lives lived between realms spiritual and geographic is strikingly relevant to an exploration of the liminal nature of life in Timor today.

Cardoso's characters are *assimilados*, members of the small class of Timorese who by dint of attaining a Portuguese education and becoming Catholics found work as minor functionaries within the colonial regime. The central protagonist is a district medic in the service of the Portuguese



state who gets around the rugged hills on a Timorese pony and wields not only a fearsome 1950s-issue glass syringe, but also a mastery of Maritime Southeast Asia's mystical martial art, *silat* – an individual who has 'added to his skills that of medicine man for those illnesses beyond the reach of penicillin' (Cardoso, 9). Sent to study in Dili's government high school, the medic's son begins to run with the city's small and decidedly impious crowd of ex-seminarians (doomed, many of them, to exile, death or treachery), who gather by the seafront to drink, ogle young Australian tourists, and talk politics.

'Nothing that went on abroad escaped our notice' (72) writes Cardoso, but despite being drawn to the city by the allure of the foreign, their understanding of life beyond Timor is limited, and the idea that the outside world might be dangerous, or that their ultimate encounter with it would be violent and scatter them to the winds, doesn't really occur to them. Their status with regards to the colonizers is something they see clearly, never forgetting that despite the bell-bottoms and office jobs it is the freedom to return to the hills, an 'eternal fall back' (54) where they can count on finding food and family, that makes city lives possible. The tragedy masterfully explored in *The Crossing* is thus not just a narrative of exile, but of journeys disrupted; of a people with identities and livelihoods often demonstrably vested in the liminal brought under the control of states necessarily obsessed with spatial categories. Village or city? Living or dead? Portuguese, Indonesian, or Timorese? Catholic or animist? Past or present? In the Timorese worlds described by Cardoso, and observed by me and others, the answers are not simple.²⁰ And yet to the colonial authorities of occupied Dili and faraway Lisbon a simple answer is unavoidable. The old medic ends up in Portugal where, demented with the impossibility of returning home, he is found wandering the streets of Lisbon²¹, believing he is on his way to visit a relative on the south coast of Timor (though he is puzzled by the proliferation of

20 Kidder (2003) describes a situation in Haiti that exemplifies how belief in the agency of spirits does not always imply disbelief in the utility of bio-medical systems. An elderly patient informs a foreign doctor, Paul Farmer, that she plans to seek revenge on the witch who sickened her. 'But if you believe that [the witch sickened you],' he cries, 'why did you take your medicines?' 'Cheri,' she says, 'eske-w pa ka konprann bagay kipa senp?' The Creole phrase *pa senp?* means 'not simple,' and implies that a thing is fraught with complexity, usually of a magical sort. So, in free translation, she said to Farmer, 'Honey, are you incapable of complexity?' (35).

21 The father of one of the families of Timorese refugees I tutored throughout 1997 and 1998 met a comparable fate. Though his many kids adapted quickly, he was unable to cope with the death of his wife, nor the cold and the unfamiliar environment/language. He lost his mind and was sometimes found on the streets of East Melbourne in a similarly confused state.



*malae*²²). On bringing him home, the police say it's not their job to rescue people lost in time.

The liminal nature of Timorese lifeworlds evokes phenomenologist Michael Jackson's notion of the *limitrophe* (2015). A Latin word adopted into French as a way of describing the area between two nation states, Jackson uses it to discuss the power of the spaces beyond things 'enshrined in received ideas of truth and reality' (6) to act as sites of social production. While such a perspective would at first seem an ideal one from which to explore life in Oecussi, the task of identifying the boundaries that are used to frame day-to-day life is not a straightforward one.

The most obvious border in Oecussi is the international one that sets it apart from Indonesia. One of thirteen districts of Timor-Leste, it is detached from the rest of the country by some 80 kilometres of Indonesian territory. A belief that the Portuguese landed here in 1515 has become a staple of Timor-Leste's historical narrative, but this date appears to be supported by scant documentary evidence. Rather, the date 24 August 1515 can be traced to a plaque in Roman numerals on a monument to the landing that the Portuguese government erected in 1974 (Da Fonseca, 2005), but, it seems, no further. Drawing on a map from the period, eminent Portuguese historian Damião Peres posits that Timor was known to his compatriots from 1512, a date that strongly suggests a landing on the island by the explorer António Abreu, who is known to have sailed through the area on a voyage he made immediately after the Portuguese conquest of Malacca in search of the fabled spice islands (Peres 1960, cited in Bernardino 1984, 76). Whatever the nature of initial contact with the Portuguese, by 1702 the village of Lifau, near the mouth of the river (*noel*) Tono, was host to a Portuguese governor (Hägerdal, 2012, 316).

Around this time, Lifau was a rough port used for the extraction of sandalwood, slaves, and honey. Effective control over these resources was the cause of bloody and protracted intrigue between several rival Eurasian groups known as Topasses or, more pejoratively, Black Portuguese. Even then, the tendency of many Timorese to live across rather than within outwardly comprehensible binary categories was evident to visitors. Hägerdal cites the English privateer William Dampier, who during the early 18th century visited Lifau and described how, despite evoking the authority of Lisbon, the Topasses did whatever they wanted (192). Conflict among the Topasses, the Dutch, and the Portuguese was intractable enough that one night in 1769 the Portuguese governor, under siege by Eurasian clans that swore

22 T: foreigners.

loyalty to his king, had anything movable loaded onto boats, anything else set on fire and by dawn was sailing east in search of a new capital, which he eventually found in the place now known as Dili (397).²³

How Oecussi remained a nominal part of the Portuguese empire even after its governor set it on fire, and the warlord who took it over and apparently offered it to the Dutch (397) is beyond the scope of this book.²⁴ Needless to say, the monument at the purported landing site stating *aqui tambem e Portugal* ('here too is Portugal') is a vast oversimplification. Despite this claim, and probably in part because of their genuine devotion to Catholicism, Oecussi's lowland clans never completely abandoned their outward loyalty to the Portuguese flag, and right up until the Indonesian invasion of 1975 it was (in theory) governed from Dili.

To date, much of the literature on Oecussi has focused on the political and ecological consequences of this colonial encounter: studies of a syncretic society at once set apart from its neighbours by their ostensible allegiance to the Portuguese empire, and connected to them through Southeast Asian trade networks and their common Austronesian heritage. In 1947, Charles Boxer drew upon his work in European colonial archives to write *The Topasses of Timor*, a comprehensive if Eurocentric summary of Oecussi's coastal clans and their cosmopolitan origins. Sixty years later, Meitzner Yoder (2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2011a, 2011b, 2015, 2016a) approached the topic from an environmental studies perspective, undertaking fieldwork in the district, and focusing on the political ecology of state and customary entities in resource extraction in which authority structures related to the Topas clans described by Boxer played a central role. Hägerdal's *Lords of the Land, Lords of the Sea* (2012), a comprehensive account of colonial rivalries on western Timor, sets out the emergence of Oecussi as a distinct political entity as a result of the often vicious interplay among Dutch, Portuguese, and Timorese interests.

While such research has successfully explored the socio-political shape of life in Oecussi, especially its connection with the broader literature on eastern Indonesia, it has tended to focus more on the perspective of lowland

23 While this incident is not widely known by the population at large (see Chapter 3 for an alternative indigenous account that has more currency), it is worth considering if only for its haunting parallel with the events that transpired 230 years later in 1999, when the Indonesian government also looted and burned the enclave before abandoning it. Though well known for their fierce resistance to the Indonesian occupation of 1975 to 1999, both cases dramatically illustrate why, over the centuries, Timorese peoples including the Meto also often sought to accommodate or avoid foreign rulers rather than confront them.

24 See instead Meitzner Yoder (2016a).



dwellers than their less accessible upland compatriots.²⁵ This book extends the work of my forebears by turning its focus to the lives of the enclave's mountain folk, a task that takes on particular importance given that they, like so many others in the lower-income world, are finding themselves engaged with the global in new and unfamiliar ways. Although highland and lowland life continues to be distinct, what is unprecedented is the large-scale settlement of highlanders (*atoin nu'af*) in lowland areas, where government control and the cash economy are strong. One apt theoretical response to this in other parts of Timor is the notion of 'cohabitation', developed in the essays brought together in Susana da Matos Viegas and Rui Graça Feijó's edited volume *Transformations in Independent Timor-Leste* (2017). While this terminology is not something I have drawn upon in writing this book, the notion, neatly defined by Brown and Grenfell (2017, 175) as 'the coexistence of entanglement of profoundly different, often incommensurate ways of being in the world' (175), is one that is clearly congruent with this work.

In Oecussi the work of 'crossing' between the *kase* and *meto* realms has emerged as a defining factor in personal and group identities, and often also in day-to-day life. This conceptual and physical space between the highland village and the lowland town, a *limitrophe* to use Jackson's (2005) term for it, has become a site of reflexive encounter and adaption, where ambitions tied to success in the outside world may be pursued through social and spiritual frameworks with their origins in the hills. At the same time, those frameworks are transformed by their appropriation of outside technologies and sources of power. Though not always immediately visible to outsiders, this process is central to understanding the nature of life as it is lived in Oecussi today.

The *kase*, the *meto*, and the threefold division of indigenous life in Oecussi

My informants believed that long ago (*un-unu'*), Timor fell under the domain of four kings (*usi'*). Although the boundaries of their kingdoms were ill-defined, Sonba'i Sila was said to have ruled the west around Kupang;

25 The major exception to this is the work of Laura Meitzner Yoder. Her research focused on the interplay between customary forms of governance and emerging state institutions in the early 2000s. The resulting thesis (2005) formed the basis for numerous articles, which I cite throughout this text. Also worthy of note is the work of Indonesian academic Victoria Sakti (2012, 2013), who wrote about the upland village of Passabe.

Amfoan Sila the centre; and Liurai Sila most of what is today Timor-Leste. The domain of the fourth king was the 800-square kilometres of rugged mountains and valleys in the island's north-west coast corresponding to what is today Oecussi district.²⁶ This king's name was Benu Sila, although his people usually called him Ama (Father) Benu and referred to themselves as his 'tame birds, tame chickens' (*kool aem, maun aem*). Today most maps label his former domain as Oecussi,²⁷ but Ambenu is still the name used by those who live there.

Custodianship of the enclave's oral history is the preserve of specialists. When asked about many aspects of the past, people would tell me apologetically it was not their place to speak of such things, and it was widely believed that watchful ancestral spirits would cause those speaking out of turn to *hetan disastre* (T: find disaster). The question of what united the district's eighteen *suko* was not one of these issues. Even older people with a nostalgic sympathy for the Portuguese were adamant that through their allegiance to Ama Benu they had been united long before the colonizers arrived. People also spoke of 1912, when his spiritual successor, Usi Joao Da Cruz Sila, had called on the enclave's people to rise up against the Europeans and they had, for a time, been close to driving them out. Even after 400 years of European hegemony, it was the Ambenu line to which the district's *suko* were loyal, and to this day the Christian title of the *usi* is appended with a reminder of Ama Benu Sila's authority. After the rebellion, the Portuguese selected some merchants from a relatively compliant clan called Da Costa, centuries-long rivals of the Da Cruz, to replace them and installed them in a large mansion by the coast where they could be closely watched. The current pretender to the kingship is a man called Antonio Da Costa Sila. While the state of Timor-Leste dates Oecussi's political difference from the first Portuguese landing²⁸, at least for the mountain-dwelling population it was always their

26 'Oecussi' is the spelling I use in this book, if only because it is the spelling the UN used when I first lived there in 2011. There are many other accepted variations. The name is a combination of two Meto words, *oe* – meaning water, and *kusi* – meaning pot, and was said to have originally referred to a place near the mouth of the River Tono with a reliable spring that was often used by visiting seafarers.

27 The Indonesian government referred to the area as Kabupaten Oe-kusi Ambeno.

28 In 2015 and 2016, the perceived failure of the state to recognize Oecussi's unique identity was the cause of tensions. To commemorate the 500th anniversary of the arrival of the European colonizers, the national government commissioned a Portuguese artist to cast a number of bronze statues depicting first contact between the Timorese and their soon-to-be rulers. When the statues were unveiled, local elders were horrified to see that they were wearing feather headdresses and footwear characteristic of central Timor, not Oecussi. While visiting foreigners and Dili dignitaries either didn't notice or saw this as a trifling issue, for many people in Oecussi

devotion to Ama Benu Sila, 'the one who wears the crown (*pilu*) and holds the sceptre' (*tuafle' mele es antao uisfaa in pilu, in es anhuuk uisfaa in uel*), that sets them apart from their neighbours.

Oecussi is unique within Timor-Leste in that its indigenous population comprises entirely a single ethno-linguistic group, the Atoni Pah Meto.²⁹ In contrast to the linguistic diversity of the eastern side of the island, the western half, including Oecussi, is dominated by the Meto, whose common language forms the basis of an identity that transcends national borders. A noticeably patriotic place (flags on front fences and adorning nativity scenes), people still maintain a sense that they are different from their compatriots. In everyday speech, easterners are referred to (usually affectionately) as *atoin belus* (people of Belu), a term that refers to the Tetun-speaking Belu people of the old kingdom of Wewiku-Wehali on Timor's South Coast. Far from separating them from their compatriots in the east³⁰, my informants explained to me that their unique ethno-history actually strengthened their identity as citizens of Timor-Leste. In Dili and beyond, they said, the Meto of Oecussi were respected and sometimes even feared for their influence with sacred (T: *lulik*) forces, a result of both the inspirited nature of their wild and roadless mountains (*pah fui*), and their status in Timorese folklore as *Rai Santo* (holy land) where the first Catholic missionaries came ashore. Only half-jokingly I was told to watch myself with Oecussi women, as if scorned they could use spells to cause a man's penis to drop off. The power of Oecussi's magic and prayer was not only a hazard for would-be philanderers. Some people would say that Oecussi was peripheral to the national struggle, but my informants warned that such assertions came from *beik teen* (T: dumb shits). The truth was, they told me, that without Meto prayers and *adat* rituals³¹ attaining independence would have been impossible.

For all this, there are signs that, at least among the young and urban, the sense of Meto difference is diminishing. While an awareness of Oecussi as

the statues were both insulting and left them open to retribution from ancestral spirits who demand that history be told accurately.

29 Indonesian sources sometimes refer to the Meto as the 'Dawan' while Portuguese-influenced sources know them as the 'Baikeno'. Both terms are exonyms of unclear origin.

30 It is worth noting that the east-west ethno-linguistic division discussed here appears to be entirely distinct from the Loro-sa'e-Loro-monu (east-west) dispute of 2006, which arose from a perception that soldiers from the eastern part of the country were being favoured for promotion within the new national army (see McWilliam 2007a for further details).

31 Oecussi's indigenous religion revolves around ongoing contact with watchful ancestor spirits who are contacted through ritual speech, and divination undertaken at sacred sites (*bale le'u*) and clan houses (*uem le'u*). As with indigenous religious practices across Timor, it is frequently referred to using the Indonesian loanword, *adat*.

united by its connection with Ama Benu, and set apart by the unique gravity of its spiritual complex persists, identities tied to the state have become increasingly important. The nationalist narrative taught in schools traces the origins of the state to colonialism rather than pre-modern kingship (Leach, 2015), and the slogan *Timor ida deit* (Timor is one!) found daubed on walls all over the country is an example of how the state is at pains to promote national identity ahead of ethnic affiliation. Despite this, the people of Oecussi have a third way of categorizing the world that has only become significant in recent times: the distinction between that which is *kase* (foreign) and that which is *meto* (indigenous/familiar).

Here the word *meto* is used in a different sense to its name for the West Timorese ethnic group. Literally meaning dry, it is also used to denote those who live as swidden farmers in the often arid highlands, as opposed to the more urbanized population, especially those who have found work in offices who are called *kase* (foreign). As a noun, it is usually translated as ‘foreigner’ and sometimes it does carry that explicit meaning (I was usually referred to as *kaes muti* – the white foreigner) although a better rendering might be ‘foreign to the hills of Timor’ or even ‘foreign to the village’. Together, the *kase* and *meto* form a set that is used to contrast practices and things considered characteristic of Timorese highland and lowland life (*amnemat*). Swidden farming is *meto*; wet rice farming is *kase*. Divination and animism are *meto*, church-based worship is *kase*. Ritual speech is *meto*, book learning is *kase*. Older villagers who never went to school, use this distinction to understand why their grandchildren were attending classes. In ritual speech, they refer to the children as writing masters or drawing masters (*akluust ini*, *akaels ini*), who through education will ‘become as the foreigners’ (*esan kaesn ini*) and move to the lowlands where the security of good paper (*sura alekot*) (that is to say, sedentary office work) and *posta alekot* (good government posts) are available.

This *kase/meto* dichotomy sits neatly within a tendency long recognized as pervasive throughout the Pacific and Maritime Southeast Asia ‘to accept both indigenous and exogenous elements as constituting their culture’ (Jolly 1992). Writing on Polynesia, Sahlins famously coined the term ‘stranger-king’ to characterize how the region’s cosmologies of governance have often accommodated or embraced the temporal authority of a colonial ‘stranger’ whose power, though significant, is enabled by the spiritual precedence of their indigenous hosts (1985, 78). Discussing the legacy of his thinking in 2012 (135) Sahlins identifies James Fox (1995a, 1995b, 2006b) and Schulte Nordholt (1971) as having been at the forefront of applying this perspective to the exploration of Timorese political and religious systems.



Cunningham, also writing on Timor in this vein, described *Meto* political systems as tending to evidence ‘complementary dualism’ (1965, 379), that is to say as polities where spiritual and temporal authority are vested in separate figures who are mutually supportive, but nonetheless define themselves by recourse to separate origin stories. Drawing on Cunningham to describe the political organization of the West Timorese domain of Insana just south of Oecussi, Schulte Nordholt attests to the presence of a similar dichotomy among the *Meto*. There, he writes, the lineage with responsibility for presenting harvest gifts is considered to be fathers (*amaf*) in relation to the tribute takers, who are symbolically their children (*ana*) (Schulte Nordholt 1971, 187).

The takeaway from all this, especially for those coming from a background where engagement with development discourses is hard to avoid (Ziai, 2013), is that it is important to be mindful of not configuring the Oecussi’s trajectory as one characterized by ‘progress’ away from the ‘undeveloped’ *meto* mountain past and towards a ‘developed’ *kase* future.

This is not to say that hill folk don’t desire the things of the outside world and hope that they will be able to access them in the future, but rather that attaining them is not a matter of moving away from the *meto* or towards the *kase*, but negotiating spiritual and physical paths between them, expressive of an ontology of relatedness and mobility. The overt dominance of the *kase* world is understood to be enabled by the support of ever-present but typically invisible *meto*. A successful life demands ongoing interaction with both. My focus here is how, in differing ways and degrees, the practice of life in Oecussi is something that emerges from the contingencies of this ‘crossing’, from movement between a highland space where *meto* matters and revolves around ritual/family/duty/agriculture that are imperative, and a lowland domain where money and outwardly orientated aspirations have become dominant in day-to-day life. I aim to show how, even for those children who succeed in doing as the ritual speakers exhort them and find ‘good paper’ and ‘good posts’, their health and fortune is still usually perceived as contingent on their relationship with networks of spirits, people, and sacred places lodged in the *meto* world of the hills.³²

32 The only other explicit discussion of this dynamic in literature in a contemporary context appears to be a single article by Gabriel Faimau (2009) published by the *Interdisciplinary Journal of NTT Development Studies*. Writing of Indonesian Timor rather than Oecussi, Faimau notes that West Timorese highlanders consciously aspire to a *kase* lifestyle, although he does not mention the perceived significance of *meto* ritual as a way of attaining and maintaining it. This may reflect the generally lesser importance of *adat* in present-day Indonesian Timor as compared to Oecussi.

Urban highlanders: movement and authority in Oecussi

None of this should be read as implying that up until recent decades Meto villages existed in a state of complete isolation, or that their lifeworlds were settled or uncontested. Fox (1988) sets out in detail how the arrival of new crops, weapons and religious ideas in West Timor was the impetus for changes that reverberated even in remote villages. These changes, however, came relatively slowly and were usually mediated through the background of the Meto as animists and agriculturalists. Like elsewhere in Southeast Asia, it is only recently that widespread urban-rural mobility has become important. Until 1975, the highland population lived almost exclusively in small hamlets (*kuan*) where they raised corn (*pena'*), dry-land rice (*ane*) and tubers (*lole*) in swidden gardens (*lele*). *Kuan* were grouped together in semi-independent political and ritual domains known as *suko*, which were ruled through a dual system with a hereditary prince³³ (*naijuuf*) supported by up to three hereditary 'priests' (*tobe*) with responsibility for the management of land and forests, notably the cycle of harvest rituals.

Most *suko* were home to up to eight or nine patrilineal clans (*kanaf*), each of which held a distinct part in the village's ritual and political life, and maintained separate 'sacred houses' (*uem le'u*).³⁴ The descendants of the

33 There is no completely faithful way to translate Meto political and spiritual terms into English, and in doing so I have tried to follow the example of Cunningham in his classic thesis submitted in 1962 at Oxford, 'The People of the Dry Land'.

34 Kutete village, for example, consisted of Lasi (*naijuuf*); Koa (*mafefa*, the *naijuuf*'s assistants and spokesmen); Eko (*naijuufnasi*, the old princes, having been deposed by the Lasi long ago); Bana (believed to be the first family in Kutete); the *tobe na'ek*, or great priests; Kolo (*tobe ana*, little priests); the Kebo (*tobe tornene*, 'harvest' priests believed to be instrumental in mediating with the ancestors for good weather); Keno; Elu; Falo and Seo.

Following McWilliam (2006, 103), I have rendered the Meto word *kanaf* into English as clan. It is worth noting here that although the term was still widely understood, as a way of referring to a family it appears to be falling out of everyday use. Asked what *kanaf* they were from (*hit kanak sa?*) younger informants sometimes looked confused, a situation quickly resolved when I substituted the term with the Indonesian loanword, *fam*. It was explained to me that this shift had only occurred since the mid-1970s. Today the term *kanaf* appears to have acquired a higher tone, generally referring to a dispersed social grouping defined by common genealogy rather than a common last name or shared domestic arrangements. Such *kanaf* have multiple sub-branches and a sense of precedence/lineage that is typically expressed through botanical metaphor, most often that of the 'tip and trunk' (see McWilliam 2009). Each group within a *kanaf* that has split off and established its own sacred house (*uem le'u*) is seen as a 'branch' stemming from an original legendary 'trunk'. Prior to the mid-1970s, expansion of this method appears to have been the primary conceptual resource through which people ordered their domestic lives throughout Timor, and was noted as such by most early ethnographers of the island including Forman (1980), Traube (1986) and Graham (1991). The partial replacement of the word *kanaf* with

original inhabitants are often afforded special status due to their perceived connection with the spirits of the land. In the mountains of Oecussi, where food insecurity is still a reality, maintaining a good relationship with these spirits can be a matter of life and death.

There are a number of explanations for the enduring distinctiveness of the highland and lowland populations. Although the form of Portuguese rule varied greatly over the centuries in Oecussi, it was generally brutal and exploitative. As throughout the rest of Timor, the Portuguese or their agents took slaves, sandalwood and corvée labour from the hill folk and, although Meitzner Yoder (2011a) shows how elements of this extraction became somewhat normalized through incorporation into the feudal relationship between the *usi'* on the coast and the *naijuuf* in the hills, non-compliance could result in the lowlanders simply taking what they wanted by force. Today the elders of highland clans remember how their grandfathers exchanged gunfire (T: *tiru malu*) with the *kaes muti'* (the white foreigners) and their Timorese allies when they came to steal sandalwood (*nabaak hau meni*).

For the highlanders of Oecussi, it was often safer to simply stay out of reach than risk confrontation. European imperialists were not the only hazard associated with the sea. The lowlands of Oecussi are malarial and highlanders travelling there frequently became sick and died, something that they usually attributed to malevolent spirits and which made many people too scared to come down to the coast. Finally, for all but the most adventurous individuals, there was little in the small Eurasian outpost in the lowlands to draw them in. In 1975, after 500 years of varying degrees of Portuguese control, there was no substantial urban settlement in Oecussi, just a *villa*, a compact colonial outpost consisting of a barracks, a pier, a convent, a school, a police station, a hospital, a jail, a church, administrative offices, and a scattering of shops run by Chinese traders. It was a place of extraction, defence, and exclusion from where an unquestionably lackadaisical 'civilizing' mission was projected and the putative civilizers felt relatively safe. They had a word for the natives welcome there: *assimilados*.

'Urban' Oecussi appeared after the Indonesians annexed the area in 1975. The town, the only substantial settlement in the enclave, is called Pante Makassar (beach of the Makassarese) after the sailors from Sulawesi who once made their camp there. People sometimes refer to the newer parts of Pante Makassar and similar urban areas throughout Timor as a *kota baru* (I: new town), a distinct concept from a *villa*. At the time of my main fieldwork

fam in daily speech appears to be at least in part attributable to the need for Meto to render their family life comprehensible to the bureaucratic state.



from 2014 to 2016, the town was a low-density sprawl of Indonesian-style houses of concrete and tin (*uem kase*) strung along a broad grid of once-sealed tracks running west through the hot flats and wet rice fields – dusty in the dry and submerged under a slurry of sewerage and trash in the wet. In outlying areas, the Indonesian-era water system had stopped functioning (no one could give me a straight story on why it hadn't been repaired) and people usually drew water from salty roadside wells. In the centre of town there were a few relatively built up streets with stores owned mostly by Timorese Chinese merchants and a market with vegetables and meat held once a week. Wary of hill dwellers with their unsettling and potentially disruptive skill at not being governed, resettlement in places like this was a way for the Indonesian state to make citizens out of people whose isolation and subsistence lifestyle had previously kept them beyond reach.

In their nuanced and detailed ethnographies detailing the contact between swidden farmers and sedentary authority, scholars such as Murray Li (2014), Scott (2009) and Graeber (2007) have noted how the advent of assertive postcolonial regimes, replete with their ideologies of inclusive nationalism, have complicated the highland/lowland encounter. In Oecussi, as in Kalimantan, the Southeast Asian Massif, and Madagascar, the colonial regime was largely concerned with extraction. While feared for their violence and strangeness, the Europeans were easily enough avoided, and never part of everyday village life. And whatever might be said about the extent of its territorial possessions, the *Meto* imagination was not territory that the Portuguese controlled. Under Jakarta things were different. While the army and police were widely loathed for their brutality and corruption, integration into the Indonesian economy and state brought the opportunity to participate in, and covet, the possibilities offered by what Appadurai (1996, 5) calls 'a plurality of imagined worlds'. After 1975, large numbers of highlanders began to settle in the urban area for the first time, attend school, and learn a widely spoken language. Some found success and even a modest degree of wealth working for the Indonesian government. These circumscribed dreams of Indonesian life – rupiah in the pocket, a tin roof, a motor scooter, visiting a big city, not having to live with the fear of starvation during dry years, all proved magnetic.

Throughout Indonesian rule, Oecussi's urban and semi-urban population expanded dramatically. Swidden farmers became wet-rice farmers and even fishermen. Thousands of people who had been born into the *meto* life grew up living a mostly *kase* one. When in 1999 virtually the entire non-Timorese population was forced to flee, Pante Makassar suddenly and unexpectedly became something that had never existed before – a



lowland settlement made up almost entirely of Meto highlanders. Clan networks that once revolved around remote villages now became partially urbanized. Inter-*suko* struggles that once played out through the taking of heads³⁵ and marriage alliances, were now manifested in the competition to place family members in government positions and secure access to the largesse of the state money emanating from Dili. The officials responsible for administering the highlands were no longer the Portuguese, their *mestizo* allies or homesick *pegawai* (civil servants) from Java, but the highlanders themselves, albeit ones living in ways their ancestors had never imagined.

In a sense the clans that once resisted lowland power now exercise it, albeit in a form critically heated and changed by their sometimes uneasy proximity to the other elements constitutive of lowland life. To an outsider, the uniforms, centrally controlled budgets, morning exercises and official stamps that define the everyday work of governance in Oecussi reveal a typically Timor-Leste combination of Indonesian-style and Dili-centric nationalism. What the present study sets out to show is how the networks and ontological understandings that underpin the ways this system operates are very often lodged in the *meto* world of the hills. In the next section of this chapter, I set each to describe each of these approaches in more detail.

Encounter. Change. Experience

The theory used throughout this book can be divided into three broad categories: theories of encounter, theories of change, and theories of experience. Here I briefly provide an explanation of this layered model before setting out to explain each part in more detail.

At its broadest this book is a study of encounter – research with its intellectual roots in the literature on highland Southeast Asia pioneered by Edmund Leach (1965) in Burma and most notably advanced in Scott's (2009) *The Art of Not Being Governed*. Looking at the history of Southeast Asia, Scott employs the term Zomia to describe a vast upland area, including parts of the Indochinese peninsula, Tibet, and Southwest China, which (historically at least) were inhabited by a population distinguished from that of the irrigated valleys by their persistent embrace of swidden agriculture, distinct languages, and animist and/or ancestor-based religion. Lowland kingdoms and European colonial regimes both tended to consider the inhabitants

35 For more detail on the role of headhunting in pre-colonial Meto *suko* see McWilliam (1996), 'Severed Heads that Germinate the State'.



of this region as 'primitive', a view accepted by early anthropologists who took it as received wisdom that these 'hill tribes' were indigenes driven from warmer and more fertile land by their inability to compete with more 'advanced' newcomers. Scott disputes this, making the case that the people of Zomia were mostly isolated by choice, choosing to settle in places and live in ways that put them beyond the reach of states that would, given the chance, tax their harvests, conscript their boys, and erode their autonomy. The Meto, though of Maritime Southeast Asia rather than the massif, fit this framework. Effectively governing themselves until recent decades, within their loose confederacy of politico-ritual domains, life revolved around subsistence farming, ritual exchange, and the veneration of ancestral and elemental spirits. Relations with the lowland state were defined by trade, hostility, and even deference, but almost never direct control.

It goes without saying that things are different now; roads, telephones, money, schools, sacks of subsidized rice from Vietnam. Even in remote areas the outside world is unavoidable, and that has affected almost everything. Critics of Scott, perhaps most prominently Hjørleifur Jónsson (2014) in *Slow Anthropology*, have taken this reality as cause to attack his Zomia hypothesis, reducing it to the proposition that 'the game must be over for the highlanders because their authentic way of life is incompatible with modern national realities' (26). This is not a perspective I share. Rather, I make the case that while it is true that travel, both physical and digitally mediated, has gone some way towards collapsing the difference between highland and lowland domains, the old ontologies continue to exist alongside the new, emergent forms. Scott's framework then is still relevant to the study of originally highland societies, but given that highlanders no longer live only in the mountains it is one that needs to be supplemented with theories that allow us to grapple with personal and societal change.

Beyond my focus on the socio-geographical fact of Oecussi's highland/lowland divide, and the evident transformation spurred by its changing nature, the challenge remains of how to describe contemporary life in Oecussi in a way that is compelling as well as cogent. Ethnographers who have previously worked among the Meto³⁶ have produced masterful accounts of their political organization and historiography, but they have generally done so from broad structuralist perspectives, rarely focusing on how (to paraphrase Geertz) individuals 'give form to experience and point to action' (1970, 95-96). In addition, then, to approaches calibrated to upland/lowland encounter and processes of societal/personal change, the third layer of theory

36 Notably Middelkoop (1963), Schulte Nordholt (1971), Fox (1999) and McWilliam (2002).

ordering this book sets out to engage with the sort of phenomenological and empirical perspectives that one of Geertz's colleagues³⁷, Bruner (1986), called the 'anthropology of experience'. A concern with the detailed description of life stories and individual states of being, will, I hope, be a way of tempering the sometimes essentializing effect of more global modes of description.

Theories of encounter

At the heart of my analysis is the idea that Oecussi was (and to an extent still is) what Scott (2009, 6-7), building on the work of Gellner (1969), Clastres (1977) and van Schendel (2002), calls a 'state-repelling space': a 'fiscally sterile' place where the authority of the lowland government was rarely or never enforced because the wealth exploitable from the population was not worth the labour required by a pre-modern state to extract it. Tsing (2005), Li (1999) and Graeber (2007) have all written about highland populations from a similar perspective. Discarding the received idea that upland populations were those who had fled due to their inability to compete with more technologically advanced invaders, they have argued that their dispersal to ecologically marginal areas and adaptation of mobile technologies of sustenance such as swidden farming was a deliberate strategy to avoid confrontation with exploitative colonial states.

Scott (2009) himself concedes that his Zomia hypothesis describes a mode of social organization that in many ways has had its time. Enabled by 'distance demolishing-technologies' (45) and spurred by the promise that underground wealth might lend value to marginally cultivatable land, since the end of the Second World War the previously little-governed uplands of Southeast Asia have increasingly become 'enclosed' by the projection of state authority (10). Extending this body of work to an analysis of current-day Oecussi, the question I pose is simply: what's next? Until decades ago, the Meto were an almost exclusively highland people who avoided, and sometimes actively resisted, any intrusion from the river valley below. Now the district's main town is inhabited mostly by relocated highlanders, and the most politically powerful among them are not the *naijuuf* (princes) or *meob* (warriors), but *funcionarius* and *xefe departentu* (departmental heads). Taking Scott as my point of departure, I ask what happens when people whose socio-political system evolved, in part, to avoid lowland authority,

37 Shortly before Geertz's death in 2006, Bruner contributed a chapter to the volume, *Clifford Geertz by his Colleagues* (Shweder & Good 2005).

physically relocate to the lowlands, and begin to appropriate and project the type of power they once resisted?

Theories of change

The one person in Oecussi who would talk to me about the old practice of head hunting assured me of two things: one, they didn't do it anymore;³⁸ two, when they did, it was a peace-building exercise. My informant had made his career dealing with the many (more or less) well-meaning foreigners who had come to reconstruct his country after 1999, often by 'building peace' in one way or another, and he had a sense of what it was that someone who looked like me probably wanted to hear. When the heads were taken, he said, the war was unquestionably over, and the process of building peace could begin.

Readers may be reassured that my point in recounting this anecdote is not to propose that the UN start taking heads as part of its peacekeeping practice, but to illustrate how the redeployment of ostensibly universal ideas in unfamiliar contexts can remake those ideas in radical and potentially unsettling ways. Perhaps the foremost theorist of this pervasive yet fragmented new paradigm of global connection is Anna Tsing. She writes that while life on earth is more connected than ever, these connections are delivered in pieces – ideas and practices that as they travel the planet may be hybridized, distorted, misunderstood, and remade through contact with ways of being and physical realities that those who created them could never have imagined. In describing this, she draws on the metaphor of 'friction' and argues that 'understanding global connection in such a way' can be a method of 'interrupting dominant stories of globalization to offer more realistic alternatives' (2005, 271). The thought of Collier and Ong (2005, 9-11), particularly their notion of 'global assemblage', which envisages 21st-century lifeworlds as sites of encounter in which socio-political frameworks unpredictably and creatively interact, has similarly been of use in contemplating this atomized reality.

What interests me about such perspectives is how they allow us to see Oecussi not as a marginal corner of an all-too-often dysfunctional state,

38 Although headhunting between *suko* in Oecussi appears to have ended sometime in the first half of the 20th century, during the war of 1999 both sides routinely beheaded those they killed for fear that the soul of an un-beheaded corpse would return to haunt them, a belief that is likely an echo of this old practice. There were also many rumours about a certain highland village whose residents were said to occasionally kidnap and ritually behead someone from Indonesian Timor. Whatever the truth of the matter, they seemed very friendly when I visited.

but as a polity with its own valid logic and function. Having served in the enclave as a United Nations (UN) adviser to the Timorese government tasked with promoting what they regarded as ‘good governance’, I can confirm that practices that, by any internationally agreed definition of the term, might be regarded as ‘corrupt’ are present.³⁹ Having worked there as an anthropologist with no real agenda other than getting to know people and trying to understand something of their lives, I can also report that the apparently corrupt officials saw this behaviour as simply providing the appropriate assistance to members of the family and clan. While the recently relocated highlanders of Oecussi have borrowed from their former rulers and current international patrons whatever words, ideas, and practices they have found useful, as I discovered during my time with the UN, they have made use of these strictly on their own terms, often in ways that would leave those responsible for importing them scandalized:⁴⁰ peace (T: *dame*), law (T: *lei*), marriage (T: *kaben*), corruption (T: *korupsaun*), family (T: *familia*), justice (T: *justifcia*). These concepts are not deployed in a vacuum but in a crowded space where they rub up against all sorts of other ideas, understandings, and interests, the process that Tsing calls friction and which ultimately determines the form they take. In Oecussi, peace and the hunting of human heads from the enemy clan across the valley can be discussed in the same sentence. In my country, Australia, it cannot. In Australia, lending government cars to relatives would land you on the front page of the tabloids and potentially in prison. In Timor, for a high-ranking public servant who is also an *atoni na'ek* (great man) in his clan, not doing so would be unthinkable. Given that so much in Oecussi is determined by this often uneasy interaction of *meto* and *kase*, the lens of Tsing’s friction seems an excellent way of inquiring into the meaning of the state and societal practices that govern everyday life.

Theories of experience

As suggested above, one of the difficulties in making the experiences emergent in travel between the *kase* and *meto* the subject of academic inquiry is

39 See Chapter 3 for more detail.

40 There is evidence that, in a less intense way, this had been going on for a long time. When he visited in 1699 English privateer and explorer William Dampier (cited in Hägerdal, 2012, 192) commented of the Timorese he met that ‘they seem in words to acknowledge the King of Portugal for their sovereign; yet they will not accept any officers sent by him.’

that, in venturing beyond clear categories and into the opaque realm of what lies between, words sometimes fail us. At the beginning of the 20th century, William James noted in his *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Malachowski 2014, 14-15) the challenge this would pose to the social sciences. The human condition, he says, 'is superabundant', and even though the meaning we seek may be vested in personal experience ('the temperament of life in its philosophy' as he calls it in the florid language of his time), making such experience manifest in writing challenges not just the conventions of academic style but language itself. Meaning, he implies, emerges not so much from narrative but from narratives manifold, indistinct, and chaotic. Working at around the same time as James, pioneering sociologist Wilhelm Dilthey (Dilthey & Rickman 1976, 161) wrote on similar themes, arguing for the value of making individual experience the object of study in a way that was later taken up by anthropologists Bruner, Turner, and Geertz. These giants of postwar anthropology had become disillusioned with the limitations of structuralist thinking that was, in their view, causing anthropology to 'wither on the vine' (Bruner and Turner 1986, 3). They argued for the utility of an 'anthropology of experience' that eschews the description of social systems in favour of a focus on 'how individuals actually experience their culture' (4). Later in the same volume, Bruner makes a point about how an anthropologist, practically, might present their data to achieve this end. 'Ethnographies', he writes, 'are guided by an implicit narrative structure' (138).

Seeking ways to apply this theory, I found inspiration in the storytelling customs of another highland people, the Hmong of Laos. In *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, Fadiman (1997, 12) describes how Hmong oral narratives often begin with the phrase *hais cuaj txub kaum txub* – 'to speak of all manner of things' – a way of 'reminding the listeners that the world is full of things that may not seem to be connected but actually are; that no event occurs in isolation' (12-13).⁴¹ Such a perspective comes close to what Geertz (1973) described as thick description, and can also be taken as an argument for the utility of borrowing from narrative prose to describe life over time and in detail. Michael Jackson's thoughts on this issue are worth quoting in detail:

When I did fieldwork on home and belonging in Central Australia, I often had the experience of being in a picaresque novel. Life seemed a succession

41 Another inspiration along similar lines comes from auteur Terrence Malik's 2011 film *The Tree of Life*, a tale of 1950s Texas that includes a 'flashback' to what appears to be the origins of life on Earth and a fight between dinosaurs.

of events or happenings, each subtly disjointed from before and after, emergent and framed. Moreover, these events were like Chekhovian slices of life. Something was brought to light in them, something was subtly changed or differently understood. When I came to write, it seemed only natural to make these episodes, many of which had been journeys, into book chapters – so imparting to the written work something of the shape of lived events. When I began writing up this research, it seemed obvious that I should use these dramatic events to throw into relief the tensions and intentions within this social field. (2005, p xxvi)

In the next section of this introduction, I briefly describe how I came to be doing fieldwork in Oecussi and begin to think about the creatively charged nature of the liminal in Meto life. In doing this I am inspired also by Wacquant (2004), Bourgois and Schonberg (2009), Holmes (2013), and Stuesse (2016), specifically because their often visceral firsthand accounts of participant observation are ones that acknowledge the value of integrating bodily, emotional, and intellectual encounters in the field, into the fabric of an ethnographic study. Including myself as a character in the stories I present will, I hope, leave readers with no illusions concerning the fundamentally limited nature of the knowledge that I (and other anthropologists) are able to attain as outsiders and short-term guests.

Encountering Oecussi: serendipity and the social imperative

Despite my early introduction to Timor-Leste discussed above, and even having briefly passed through it as a backpacker travelling overland/sea from Melbourne to China shortly after its renewed independence in 2002 ('these people', I wrote in my journal as I looked out the window of the minibus, 'look hungry'). By 2011, both my nomadism and dreams of returning to Timor to work and maybe even do some good had fizzled out. The dead-end job I was working in Sydney didn't offer much in the way of prospects for adventure, but was sufficiently undemanding that I could use company time to complete a master's degree and apply (while the boss was looking the other way) for jobs that did.

'Australian Youth Ambassadors for Development' (AYAD) was a federal government programme intended to fund the placement of Australian youth⁴² with government departments and non-government organizations

42 Defined as I was not yet 31 at the date of departure. I turned 31 two months after arriving.



(NGOs) in developing countries, mostly as ‘advisers’. Luckily for me, a senior manager with the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Timor-Leste at the time was always on the lookout for ways to save money, and realized that the AYAD programme offered an opportunity for him to acquire staff members whose salaries came out of Canberra’s budget rather than his. Within the space of a few weeks I went from vegetating in a Sydney office cubicle to looking out at the mist-shrouded mountains of central Timor from the open window of a UN Mi-8⁴³ flying into Oecussi.

I describe my time with the UN in 2011 and 2012 and how it set the scene for the fieldwork that is the basis of this book in detail in Chapters two and three, but suffice to note here that it involved serving as an ‘adviser’ in a Timorese government office concerned with programmes intended to create employment and improve labour conditions in the district. This position was distinct from that of the other UN employees based there. While their work mostly took place from a guarded compound with 24-hour electricity and used the English language, I worked ‘outside the wire’ as they called it, immersed, during the day at least, in the reality of a Timorese public servant. I quickly came to acquire a network of local friends and acquaintances and an appreciation of how the (frequently dysfunctional seeming) business of government there was both enabled and stymied by an older, indigenous way of doing things that I would later come to know as the *meto*.

Living in a world so different from the one I had come from (and yet so close physically: Australia was near enough that in the dry season the north wind delivered to us the baking heat of its deserts, and the arid hills with their stunted gum trees and red soil resembled the Kimberly Ranges) was exciting because with every small element of life in Oecussi that I did start to understand, came an awareness of how much more there was to explore. Sometimes I would say to my fellow UN staff, ‘This place would be an anthropologist’s dream’.

The story of how I actually did end up returning to Oecussi as an anthropologist is long and features much good fortune, not the least of which was that due to my experience with the ILO in the district, I was able to make the case to a funding panel at The Australian National University that it was a place with which I was deeply familiar and where I was ready to work. At the time I might have even believed this optimistic appraisal of the situation, although when I finally did step off the ferry to begin my fieldwork at dawn one Friday morning in July 2014, it didn’t take me long

43 A large Soviet-designed helicopter intended for carrying soldiers and cargo. Between 2006 and 2012 they provided most of the UN’s air transport in Timor.



to discover that I had been hopelessly over-optimistic. Things had changed in the three years since I was last in the enclave, and I was not even close to being as prepared as I had hoped.

The nature of this change was quite simple: at the end of 2012, the UN left. Whereas during my first time in Oecussi, I had been one outsider among many, now I was more or less an alien alone. In some ways this might have actually been an advantage – present-day anthropology builds upon the work of scholars whose methods were critically shaped by their (sometimes accidental) physical and social isolation⁴⁴, but as the coddled product of a decidedly more connected time, it was new to me. My initial stay had been characterized by tentatively Tetun-speaking days, with off-hours spent among an often eccentric⁴⁵ multinational community, consisting of UN

44 Perhaps the most famous example of this is Bronislaw Malinowski, one of the towering figures of 20th-century anthropology, whose seminal fieldwork partially stemmed from his being stranded in the Trobriand Islands for four years due to the First World War. Although there was little sign of it in his books such as *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) and *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* (1935) that he wrote amid comfort and acclaim in London, with the posthumous release of his diaries (1967) it became clear that far from being admiring of or even always engaged with Trobriand culture, throughout his stay on the islands he often struggled with intense (and bad-tempered) loneliness and ennui that on some days left him struggling to emerge from beneath his mosquito net. Although known for writing as a confident man of science, his tetchy reaction when challenged on ethnographic detail (see Pulman 2004 for a discussion of his attempt to discredit a colonial official who refuted his assertion that Trobriand Islanders were unaware of the link between coitus and paternity) hints he may have been more aware of his limitations than he was willing to publicly acknowledge.

45 I use this term deliberately. Throughout 2011 and 2012 I found the behavior of the UN police in Oecussi fascinating due to its situational and resolutely 'off the record' nature. In the boarding house (I: *kost*) we shared, Malik the Egyptian (not his real name or nationality) had me watch a clip from his favourite film, *The Devil's Advocate*, in which Satan (Al Pacino) rather graphically urges his son (Keanu Reeves) to help him beget the antichrist, before soliloquizing to me about what this scene revealed about the Middle East conflict. Declaring haughtily that taking a *mandi* (I: bucket shower) was beneath him, Darius (another pseudonym) from Romania would spend extended periods of time lathering himself in the filthy ablutions demountable at the UN base, taking the opportunity for a leisurely chat with anyone who happened to use the urinal as he did so. One much-repeated tale had a pair of international 'peacekeepers' get into a physical scuffle over use of a favoured vehicle from the car-pool and having to be broken up by their Timorese counterparts. The occasion when a Portuguese police officer (jokingly?) declared he would repatriate a troublesome colleague 'in a body bag' was cause for unfettered hilarity rather than an issue for HR. What is striking about such antics is that, wherever they were from, the UN police were educated, well-connected and ambitious – individuals who knew how to look smart in a uniform and toe the line. Once deployed, however, often bored, operating in a second or third language, and not fully accountable to the laws and networks that really mattered to them, eccentricities that would have been suppressed in their home countries emerged for all to see. Though beyond the scope of this book, the behavior of UN personnel posted individually far from home would make a good topic for further study.



police (UNPOL, there to ‘mentor’ the local police force rather than enforce the law) and a handful of electoral advisers and technical contractors. Having been seconded to the UN from their home countries, many seemed bemused and/or slightly bewildered about ending up in this remote corner of an island they had typically never heard of nor thought much about before. Mostly out of a lack of other options, they provided each other with a sense of belonging and social support, united by shaky international English and general indifference to the affairs of the Timorese, whose chances of building a functioning, peaceful country were dismissed as poor, but generally evinced little interest in at all.

For all its problematic aspects this small (mostly male) international community was good about welcoming new members – a source of diversion, if nothing else. The moustachioed Pakistani military man who organized a daily game of badminton on the *alun-alun* (Indonesian-style grassy field/sports ground in the centre of town) warmly invited me to join. A pair of Romanian police would sometimes share the stash of homemade *palinka* (plum brandy) they brought with them and, after a few glasses, would attempt to teach all-comers to swear ‘like in Transylvania’. Perhaps because there was often little else to do, in the cafeteria/bar that was the hub of the small UN base there was always someone up for a game of pool – a happy state of affairs that persisted until the night a particularly heavy-set Portuguese police officer got liquored up and thought it fun to jump on the pool table, putting it permanently out of commission. While working with the UN in Oecussi, even glued to a sticky plastic chair in a Timorese government office during the day, my engagement with Timorese life was something that usually took place on my terms.

By contrast, in July 2014 I found myself one of perhaps three people in the entire district with the ability to converse in English, and my immediate feeling was one of being overwhelmed. My first morning back I walked to where the UN base had been in the centre of town, knowing that it had been decommissioned in late 2012, but somehow not able to believe it until I had been there. What had been a Kafkaesque bubble where international busy work was carried out to the reassuring chug of the generator was now silent – used in part by the municipal government but mostly just abandoned, the gate ajar, vines overtaking the razor wire, broken glass, and yellowing papers underfoot in what had been offices. As I poked around the remains of the bar/cafe where I had spent so many nights, I was startled by a dishevelled figure materializing at the door.

‘*Malae,*’ (foreigner) he said. ‘You’re back.’

Although the man was vaguely familiar at best, it transpired that back when the UN was still in town he had been one of the security guards who



worked the gate and had nightly signed me in when I arrived for my meal. Everyone else had left a year ago, he explained, but not him. He alone had been faithfully waiting for 'us' to return. And now we had. This made him very happy (T: *kontenti loos*), he said. He hoped he could have his job back.

In rusty Tetun, I tried to explain that for better or worse my presence didn't herald the return of the UN mission and I was just there, independently, to do some research for my *skripsi S3* (I: PhD thesis). I would not be personally reopening the compound. The man smiled, nodded, seemed unconvinced and insisted I accompany him to what remained of the guardhouse where we could celebrate the long-awaited return of the UN with a cup of coffee. Inside was a dank mess of bedding and a kerosene stove on the floor. On the bench the security guards had once used to fill out their paperwork were a few dirty plastic cups and assorted sheets of paper. He rustled about looking for one in particular.

'This is it,' (T: *ida ne'e*) he said hopefully, plucking it out and handing it to me.

It seemed to be some sort of requisition form – faded UN letterhead up the top, a bewildering jumble of bureaucratic English below, evidently the object of considerable anxiety and sweaty penmanship. After squinting at it for a few minutes I managed to decipher enough to see that it was an attempt to make a business case for a computer, which by allowing him to more effectively keep track of who was coming and going at the main gate would enhance security. All he needed now was to find someone to lodge it with.

He looked at me imploringly. 'Can you give it consideration Maun?' (T: brother).

'*Kolega*,' (T: mate, friend) 'I'm a just a student. I don't work for the UN anymore. There's nothing I can do to help you.'

'Thank you, brother. I hope you can do something.'

Especially at the beginning of my fieldwork, one of the difficulties of trying to communicate in okay but far-from-perfect Tetun was that if I told people something they didn't want or expect to hear, they tended to assume they had misunderstood.

I never went back. Later I heard he had accosted a Timorese friend of mine, demanding to know why 'his foreigner' had not delivered the computer yet. He was a crazy man (T: *bulak*) my friend told me; I should take care to avoid him.

A month later, I met him again. I was away from the town this time, piloting my little scooter up the narrow road that steeply ascends from the rice fields of the Tono Valley on my way to visit some friends in the mountains.



I had just come around a sharp bend when I saw him, standing under a fig tree with a bundle of banana leaves (the favoured fodder for tethered cows) beside him and a cigarette smouldering in his mouth. Heeding my friend's advice for a second I considered whether I might be able to zoom past unseen, but on the rugged roads of rural Oecussi, which are not at all conducive to zooming, only really bitter enemies decline to stop and chat. I pattered into the shade alongside him and brought the bike to a halt.

He didn't seem all that surprised to see me. *Malae*, (T: foreigner), he said as though he saw me there every day, 'where are you going?'

I was worried he might still be angry and was glad he didn't seem to be. Like in most Austronesian languages, 'Where you are going?' (*ba ne'ebe?*) is as much a generic salutation as a serious inquiry about one's eventual destination.

'Just to visit some friends,' I replied.

He smiled broadly as if this amused him. 'Good, *malae*. Good.' He didn't seem to have anything else he wanted to say. We looked at each other awkwardly.

Hare dalan, (T: watch the road) he said eventually.

'You too, my friend,' I replied, relieved that this reunion was to be an exceptionally short one and that he hadn't asked about the computer. I flicked the bike's starter button. He tossed his cigarette and went to re-shoulder the leaves.

Ate logu Maun, (T: See you later, brother) I called.

Hit tnao tok Uis Neno, ('Go with God') he replied, and that was the last I saw of him.

Although fleeting, coming early in my fieldwork as it did, my encounter with the former security guard was significant in the way it shaped my thinking about life in Oecussi and how I worked there as an anthropologist. On a broad level it solidified my sometimes wavering conviction that, difficult as it was, there was value in being alone in the field, in particular through the way the isolation could be an impetus to engage with whatever serendipitous encounter might emerge (very often literally) around the next bend in the road.

More specifically, it prompted me to reflect on the possibility that the frameworks I had initially used to understand Oecussi, and had been socialized to believe were universal (borrowed, for the most part, from 'development' thinking, and strengthened by their association with often powerful sources of 'first world' authority and money), were in fact utterly foreign to this place, and that even when they were deployed, they almost never (at least from the perspective of the locals) retained their original form or meaning.



In 2011-2012, in my capacity as an international civil servant tasked with helping build a 'modern' state, it was hard not to see Oecussi as a place defined by what it lacked. The accepted term 'least developed country' had its own well-worn acronym, and by any internationally recognized metric there didn't seem to be much doubt about its applicability – Oecussi's mountain roads were appalling, electricity was often absent and, as the actions of the guard illustrated, its economy moribund. And yet, returning as an anthropologist, I began to notice that the graphs, acronyms and reports outsiders tended to rely upon to make sense of the situation had little to do with how the people whose lives they ostensibly quantified saw things. Rather, it seemed, that if I was to have any chance at all of ever beginning to get a sense of how the Meto interacted with and found meaning in the world, I would have to set aside the presumptions I had brought with me to humbly listen and watch. To accept, though it was difficult as both a scholar and a civil servant, that much of what I saw would be almost completely foreign to me, that I would never fully understand and that to do otherwise, would be doing both me and my hosts a grave disservice.

From any point in Pante Makassar it was possible to see the often cloud-shrouded massif of central Timor looming over the town, and I wondered if in this geographical fact I might find a starting point for my task. Beyond their striking physicality, how might the presence of the mountains, and the preponderance of people whose origins were within them, influence the life of the town? Though on its dusty streets, the former UN guard presented himself to me as a desperate job seeker, serendipity, occasioned by nothing more sophisticated than persistent hanging round, had revealed to me another dimension to his story that he either chose not to disclose or considered so commonplace as to not be worth mentioning. His determination to reprise his cherished years as a UN gate operator were not so much an attempt to survive, as to attain a sort of modernity that, though passionately coveted, was predicated on the presence of a hinterland to which he could fall back on to find food, shelter, and family. What other sort of shadows, I wondered, did economic, social and spiritual realities lodged in the Meto-speaking mountains have on the life of the increasingly Tetun-dominated and accessible town? How did people go about the business of crossing the frontier between these two worlds that I would later come to associate with the terms *kase* (foreign) and *meto* (familiar)? What things did they carry with them? What did they leave behind?

A month into my fieldwork, as the former guard receded into the rear-view mirror, I knew that in spite of all the difficulties involved, it was only through an extended and immersive presence that I could hope to approach these questions in any meaningful or original way.



Strolling in a Southeast Asian borderland: local frameworks, international aspirations

During my first week back in the enclave, I tried to hold back a building sense of panic over what I'd got myself into by starting to assemble a routine calculated to keep me busy and become the basis for how I would spend the rest of my stay. Trajectories of learning were charted, budgets were calculated, emails were carefully drafted and expressed back to HQ. One morning, looking out at the limpid Savu sea, I created a spreadsheet to keep track of the days and dollars, which I then forget all about for five years. Instead, as it happened, my research defied managerialism – almost every week there was some new escapade to buckle the hypothetical scaffolding I had tried to fit together, and everywhere I went were stories and sacred houses, tales of ancestral footpaths, and extravagant promises of futuristic roads – people wanted me to listen – ‘Will you have another cup of coffee, Mr. Mike?’ The amount of data was only limited by my ability to scribble down fieldnotes and decipher them later and although, as I touch on below, not all of the places I went or episodes I observed get their own chapter in this volume, critically they all gave shape to this book and its conclusion, and so are worth quickly reflecting upon here.

Settling in a house owned by a fisherman in the coastal village of Oesono (once the seat of the district's Portuguese-endorsed king), my immediate goal was quite simple: to maximize the time I spent around people and their daily activities, and minimize the time reading novels in my hammock. Ethnographically I deliberately cast a broad net. My material was daily life, and my method was simply trying to be around enough that I might, eventually, become a relatively unobtrusive observer of it.

As it turned out, time was not hard to fill. Although the enclave was small, travel along its rugged roads and mountain paths was arduous, and the daily work and sociality of those I interacted with tended to stretch out over days rather than hours. Mondays and Tuesdays I would often spend in the border village of Passabe where smuggling goods, cattle, and people across the international border was a way of life for many.⁴⁶ On Wednesdays or Thursdays I would usually try to walk up the jungle trail from the rapidly modernizing village of Mahata on the coast, to Kutete in the mountains where shifting agriculture was still the basis of day-to-day life and harvest rites (*fua*) presided over by Meto ritual practitioners (*tobe*) were important.

46 In the end there was simply no room in this book for most of the material I gathered in Passabe. It will form the basis of a follow-up volume.



Kutete was home to a variety of helpful characters, in particular a former journalist Jon Koa; his mother, Maria known for her expansive garden of medicinal herbs; and Laban, a good-natured young schoolteacher from the lowlands who rued his luck at having been posted to this place of long, empty afternoons and chilly evenings and was very happy for my company. While the presence of people like this made it a good place for research it was always with a slight sense of guilty relief that I made my way back to town for a good meal. Weekends in Pante Makassar were given over to activities like hanging out at the market, visiting friends, or attending weddings; leisurely activities that were only interrupted by the need to shift my notes from the school exercise books in which I was constantly scrawling them to the relative safety of my computer.

Despite or perhaps because of its ever-shifting nature, to my surprise the method worked well and I slowly became a familiar face in the places I frequented, sometimes to the point where those I was closest to started to worry if I didn't appear. Once, late to depart for Passabe, I got an irate phone call from my main informant there and cockfight supremo, Matteus.

'Mr. Mike,' he said in agitated-sounding Tetun, 'where are you?' He then informed me sternly, in English, that 'time is money'. I was startled to hear this, both because Matteus didn't speak English and Passabe was a place where the tending of gardens and goats was rarely very profitable or particularly hurried. When I spoke to him later, he told me that he had learned the phrase from his son, and understood it to be a way of scolding someone for being late. I took his point. Though the original idea had been to recruit 'informants', the relationship I established with Matteus ended up becoming more real than anything suggested by that clinical term, replete with the need for reciprocal care and courtesy. In an early version of this manuscript a reviewer gave me pause by asking about my use of the word 'friends' to refer to the people who inhabit this ethnography – but in truth they were both. Cultural, linguistic and somatic immersion was at once a research method and a way of fulfilling my simple need not to be alone in a place far from home.

Although adapting to speaking mostly in Tetun and Meto rather than English was a challenge, in many ways Oecussi in 2014 to 2016 was a particularly congenial site for a lone anthropologist. It was, very often, a friendly place for a foreigner, where many people both enjoyed the novelty of having an interested stranger to tell their stories to, and had time to do it.⁴⁷ This

47 I began to understand this better on visiting a friend who was doing his fieldwork in Mashad, Iran, where people tend to be far more wary of foreigners, and weather, politics and social norms made engaging with the community a more difficult prospect.

tendency was admittedly more pronounced in and around Pante Makassar, which had hosted a small number of *kaes muti*' (white foreigners) like me for centuries⁴⁸ than in the mountains where people (though still generally accepting of my presence) could be wary of my strange looks and presumed high status. Even in the centre of town the roads were usually empty, and many people passed their days working in the gardens around their house. There was always someone happy to chat if they saw me strolling by.

'Bon dia,' they would say as I came ambling along (I was hard to miss), perhaps pausing as they chopped up a banana tree stem for the pigs or looking up from the sweaty task of pulling weeds from the corn garden in their front yard.

'Bon dia,' I would reply.⁴⁹

If the friendly stranger was a man and not doing anything pressing,⁵⁰ they would often ask me to come into their yard, where plastic chairs would be placed in the shade, a plastic table fetched and draped with a tablecloth, and his wife or children asked to fetch coffee and biscuits.

While Southeast Asia is often of interest to researchers today for its rapidly growing economy and the increasingly complex nature of its connections to global networks of belief and commerce, for most of my stay in Oecussi, and despite sometimes fevered talk of the new special economic zone (see Chapter 4), it remained (on the surface of things at least) truly sleepy in a way that reminded me of the stories older people had told me

48 Indeed there were several families in the town that proudly counted such *kaes muti*' among their ancestors. These foreign relatives were mostly Portuguese soldiers and administrators; but there were also people around with tales of African and Indian ancestors.

49 This form of interaction, referred to in Tetun as *hasee malu* (greet each other) is a social norm throughout rural Timor. Especially in communities where everyone knows everyone, it is important to establish the identity and intentions of any stranger who is wandering round.

50 It is worth noting here that this form of social interaction was highly gendered. While women would greet me warmly and indeed sometimes offer me a glass of water if I looked particularly thirsty, for her to invite an unknown man (even a wandering foreigner such as me) to socialise could easily trigger a storm of gossip, and was thus something they generally avoided. On the few occasions women did ask me in, I was politely asked to wait outside while children were dispatched to find the man of the household to deal with the foreigner. As a result of this convention the people I spent the most time with tended to be male, something that certainly shaped my perspective on Meto life. The main exception to this rule was a number of older matriarchs whose age and social status meant that the pressure for them to act in a socially 'modest' manner had been somewhat relaxed. One particularly close informant/friend, the formidable Avo Marta, was even known to enjoy smoking the occasional cigarette while she was talking to me, a vice which in Oecussi was otherwise almost exclusively the preserve of men. Marta was able to get away with it in part simply because no one was willing to risk her wrath by even hinting she do otherwise.

about growing up in outer Indonesia in the 1960s. In Oecussi the echoes of global empires and indigenous kingdoms were ever present, but the instant global connection and depersonalized urban life that characterizes the 21st century throughout much of the region had yet to fully arrive. On Monday and Thursday morning an overnight ferry would arrive from Dili, usually, and for the majority without a passport this was the only legal means of overland travel to Timor-Leste's other twelve districts. The international border that surrounded the enclave is a hard one, and although the police and soldiers garrisoned on it would happily look the other way for those who were visiting relatives, or on a rare shopping trip to Kefamenanu, an undocumented overland journey to Dili and back was a far more uncertain prospect. The small airfield⁵¹ served only a solitary single-engine plane operated by the Missionary Air Fellowship, which visited irregularly for medical evacuations. While government officials would requisition *kareta estada* (state cars) as runabouts for themselves and their families, in mid-2014 private cars were almost unknown, and around midday on any hot afternoon in the shade of the trees that lined the town's main street that ran from the *alun-alun* to the sea, you could find dogs, pigs, cows, and goats dozing complacently in the shade. While public servants living in the town would typically own a motor scooter, as did some better-off families in the hills, this was still a place where journeys long or short were very often made on foot.

This book, then, is one that explores not just the specific story of a place where life is shaped by a tangle of tangible boundaries, but its status, common in this quickly changing world, betwixt what will almost certainly be distinct epochs in terms of economic activity and social organization. The sociable nature of strolling was essential to my fieldwork in Oecussi, and

51 The redevelopment of Oecussi's rough airfield into an 'international airport' replete with long runway capable of landing large jets was a centre-piece of the plans for a special economic zone. For most of my fieldwork this was just talk, and the airfield remained a rocky strip used by a missionary-operated air ambulance and as grazing land for local herders – a precarious situation for goats and air-travelers alike. At the end of 2018 locals living near the project side told me that state-owned Indonesian construction giant PT Wijaya Karya (usually known as WIKA), in partnership with the Portuguese Instituto de Soldadura e Qualidade (ISQ), had almost finished transforming this into a large and modern-looking transport facility that is due to be officially opened in 2019. At the present time, the airport is only used by the air-ambulance and a state-owned Twin Otter passenger aircraft operated by a Canadian company. It is hoped that in future some of the regional airlines that operate in eastern Indonesia might add Oecussi to their schedule, thus directly linking it to destinations such as Kupang, Flores and Bali. Despite this, unless they are ill enough to qualify for medical evacuation, air travel remains out of reach for much of the population and is likely to remain so.

Image 4 Persuading a cow to board the ferry to Dili

Photo by Rui Pinto

yet it was characteristic of a place which reliable electrification, motorized transport, and large-scale integration into the global economy had yet to reach. More than any other subject, when I spoke to people it was to the bright and busy future that was thought to be around the corner that our conversation would often drift. Although this book is one that sets out in detail how Meto socio-spiritual frameworks remain a key resource for understanding and acting on the world in Oecussi, as they are deployed in pursuit of an internationally connected *kase* future, they are being profoundly and continually remade.

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