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## Looking back into the future: Temporalities of hope among the Fataluku (Lautém)

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In July 2012, one of my interlocutors in Lautém (the easternmost district of Timor-Leste, where the Fataluku live) told me of his 15-year experience fighting the Indonesian occupation army in ‘the bush’, which he saw as closely associated with his current expectations:

We went to the bush; we went back and forth in the bush. All the party leaders told the people they had to resist in the bush to guarantee the liberation of the land, and the people. With that phrase we were fighting for two objectives: first to liberate the land; second to liberate the people. We have liberated the land, now we need to liberate the people.

And he added:

To liberate the people means to lead the people into a better life – and that is our goal: to liberate the people in intellectual, economic and social terms, to free civil society and adopt a sustainable economy, and guarantee a healthy environment and life.

During the Indonesian occupation there were several moments when he believed his struggle would come to a positive end; at other times, he became hopeless. These were times when he was humiliated by several of his relatives and friends who did not side with the resistance and looked at him as a defeated, weak man fighting without any justified hope.

The occupation is regarded by my friend in a way that epitomises visions common to other interlocutors in Lautém: as a time in which the hope that drove people was not confined to obtaining political independence but encompassed a model for future livelihood based on a stable economy and ‘healthy environment’. As Rui Graça Feijó and I heard time and again, the choice of those days was between a sustainable future and none at all.<sup>1</sup> Those who fought for independence expressed such radical feelings in the well-known expression ‘Independence or Death’.

Life experiences among the East Timorese Resistance are similar to other historical experiences of oppression and despair, such as apartheid, which led Vincent Crapanzano (2003: 5) to claim ‘the extraordinary resilience humans have to the insupportable, to hopelessness and despair’. However, hope also acquires ambivalent forms under certain circumstances, eventually becoming a mechanism of resistance to oppression (Sarró 2015: 226–27). Another perspective, from Judith Bovensiepen (2016: 77) analysing the current megaprojects of the Timorese state, sustains the view that the utopian hope of the independence struggle is being retrieved: ‘the utopian hopes for radical societal transformation once associated with Independence ... are now associated with oil wealth’. Elizabeth Traube (2011: 131) shows that nowadays hope among the Mambae (the people originating from Timor-Leste’s western highlands) is associated with the idea of repaying the efforts made during the resistance. Rui Graça Feijó and I have also considered the relevance of repayments to understand the investments of the relatives of ‘martyrs’ (people who were killed in open fighting or died as a direct cause of being involved in the liberation struggle) made in reconstructing graves (Viegas and Feijó 2016, 2018).<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, I focus on expressions of hope understood in the context of a complex, non-linear connection with the resistance struggle in the past. Taking as my main axis Crapanzano’s (2013: 4) proposal – ‘to give possible shape to a notion of hope as a category of both experience and analysis’ – I discuss how prosperity and hope are experienced at the level

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2 The Timorese make a clear distinction between victims of war and martyrs. The Portuguese word *martir* is a very clear-cut category used in Timor-Leste to refer to those who died in the fight for independence (cf. Viegas and Feijó 2018).

of a family economy in present-day Lautém. The enactment of hope in Lautém, a region where a great majority of the population was engaged in the resistance fight against Indonesian occupiers, reveals a number of other economic, temporal and spiritual dimensions, such as the personal strategies of action and social relations developed during the resistance, as well as the political tensions that are rooted in the occupation period. Hope also expresses different scales of time and activates certain networks – not just those developed in the resistance, but also those involving the ancestors. This chapter seeks to tease out the temporal dimensions that are implicit in the hope for a more prosperous future. It does so by following Eric Hirsch and Charles Stewart's (2005: 263) idea of historicity, as the 'relevant ways in which (social) pasts and futures are implicated in present circumstances'.

The ethnographic analysis of hope is advanced here by analysing the acquisition of a minibus (*mikrolet*) by a family who inhabit the village of Assalaino to operate in the capital of Dili. Describing the different aspects involved in this event is a way of deepening our understanding of the experience of prosperity involving relatives in Lautém, Dili and migrant communities. Of particular interest are the dynamics of people's networks (networks that include both the living and the ancestors). I take hope as a central category to explore these different dynamics and agencies given that, as Crapanzano also noted, hope entails the involvement and/or dependency of other agencies and/or other individuals in achieving one's goals. When making a distinction between desire and hope, Crapanzano underlines that the category of hope implies an action which:

... depends on some other agency – a god, fate, chance or other – for its fulfilment. Its evaluation rests on the characterization – the moral characterization – of that agency. You can do all you can to realize your hopes, but ultimately they depend on the fates – on someone else. (Crapanzano 2003: 6)

Hope and prosperity may be used here as interchangeable words. The literal meaning of prosperity also involves both an appeal to the forces of dependency on 'someone else' or on some other agency – destiny and fortune – and to a propositional amelioration of material conditions. Hope in the case described here involves a hope for a more prosperous life.

The first section of this chapter presents a very brief overview of subjective experiences of lived economic conditions under the Indonesian occupation, showing how impossible prosperity was then for the average family,

according to current concepts. The second section is an ethnographic description of the *mikrolet* acquisition by a close interlocutor, arguing that this cannot simply be described as a financial investment. A deal that apparently pertains to the domestic realm and involves a couple, their daughter and son-in-law is shown to mobilise different social networks and temporalities. The third section examines the integration of this process into the set of relations with the ancestors, to whom the minibus is presented in a ritual ceremony. This ceremonial procedure implies an extended network of kinship and its historical spectre, akin to the one that Bloch and Parry (1989) called ‘long term transactional orders’. The concluding section develops the idea of the temporality of hope, specifically with regards to the chain of past events that inform the enactment of hope in the present.

## Family prosperity pre- and post-independence

In Lautém, persons frequently situate themselves in the world and evaluate their perspectives of the future by contrasting the social and economic restrictions experienced under the Indonesian occupation and the overture of new possibilities that independence has generated. Economic precariousness, resulting from marginalisation and oppression, had particularly negative outcomes in the 1980s when estimates indicate more than 300,000 Timorese in Indonesian-occupied ‘Timor Timur’ were secluded in ‘internment camps’ or ‘resettlement villages’ (Nixon 2012: 87). In Lautém, the concentration of the surviving population was profoundly felt in some villages more than in others, and in Assalaino for only one year. However, the destruction of food supplies was widespread. From the mid-1980s, direct violence tended to subside, but the conditions for the recovery of family-based economies were not reinstated, which is now regarded as a major form of oppression given that, with the destruction of domestic livelihoods, local economies were set to zero. Food gardens were destroyed and the restrictions on movement meant people were often unable to tend agrarian plots. In addition, the regular diet, which now includes pork, goat and water buffalo meat (namely in ritual occasions), was made impossible by the decimation of livestock.

In the 1990s, many people report that the local population’s access to development investments in the region was, at most, precarious. Besides family-based initiatives, state jobs (for example, a teacher) were not easily accessible to locals. Healthcare provisions were available, but most people

did not use them for many different reasons, including the fear that they would be under surveillance. People feared that doctors had connections with the regime, portraying a situation acknowledged by Rod Nixon (2012: 97) that ‘villagers, at least at this time, were often afraid to go to the health clinics, while public health staff had similar concerns about visiting the villages’. Nixon shows that the Indonesian development policies in the 1990s did not reach the vast majority of the Timorese population, making this ‘a period of mostly poor development outcomes, despite substantial capital flow and a mostly high economic growth rate’ (ibid.: 89). The idea that national emphasis on rapid economic growth did not have positive effects ‘for many who lived at the geographical and political margins of the nation’ has also been reported for other marginal regions of Indonesia in the same period (cf. Keane 2002: 67).

In 1999, the wave of destruction – from the scorched-earth policy unleashed after the results of the popular consultation were publicised – struck Lautém quite severely. Reporting on his visit to Timor at that time, James Fox (2000: 25) claimed that the districts most affected were Lautém, Bobonaro and Covalima: ‘[t]he local populations of these districts will take longer to re-establish themselves and rebuild their way of life’.

As Andrew McWilliam (2011) shows, the economic hardship from the destruction in 1999 has been superseded in Lautém mostly thanks to the reinvigoration of exchange networks. It is a process parallel to that described by Keane for Sumba, where he observed money being channelled to the ‘thriving system of ceremonial exchange’ as a form of reinvigorating domestic life (Keane 2002: 67). In addition, such activities are remarkably adapted to combining ‘modernist aspirations with revivalist ancestral spirit ontologies’, namely ritual blessing for ‘instrumental ends’ (McWilliam 2009: 174, 2012: 82). This should also be connected to the way the power of the ancestors is seen across Timor-Leste as ambivalent darkness, as highlighted in many contributions to this volume (see Palmer, Chapter 10; Trindade and Barnes, Chapter 8; Bovensiepen’s Introduction; and McWilliam’s Afterword). In Lautém, activating ceremonial exchange networks, combined with grave reconstruction, have fulfilled a similar role of revitalising social networks. As Rui Feijó and I have argued (Viegas and Feijó 2016, 2018), and as I address later in this chapter, economic renewal was advanced by several monetary activities, among which are state pensions (including those for ‘veterans’ and ‘martyrs’). Remittances from the flourishing transnational chains of young Timorese migrants in Portugal, Ireland and the United Kingdom are also a key to this

process (McWilliam 2009, 2012: 74). A generation of youth seeking ‘freedom and opportunities’ in Dili and abroad send remittances, which articulate their aspirations for modernity that, as McWilliam (2012: 73) observes, may satisfy desires for modern consumption. This is also part of the phenomenon of the rural–urban flux, which has seen Dili grow by 33 per cent between 2004 and 2014 (McWilliam 2015: 227). In fact, several researchers have observed that Dili has become a catalysing point for modernity, quickly moving away from the rest of the rural territory of the ‘districts’, transforming this new nation into a country marked by what Douglas Kammen (2009: 390) named ‘the primacy of the capital’.

The family event of buying a *mikrolet*, which I followed in 2014 and will discuss in detail here, made me aware of the centrality of Dili in contemporary family dynamics in Lautém, dynamics that are subject to the flux and continuity of the rural milieu of Lautém and the urban capital. As we shall see, the apparently simple acquisition of a minibus for a family enterprise was intertwined with a specific form of hope (the expectation that the vehicle would lead to domestic prosperity), and hence makes explicit the event’s historicity – ‘the manner in which persons operating under the constraints of social ideologies make sense of the past, while anticipating the future’ (Hirsch and Stewart 2005: 262).

## Buying a *mikrolet*

Using his teacher’s salary from his position at Assalaino’s primary school, his family’s ‘veteran’ pension and remittances from a relative in Ireland, Pitinumalai<sup>3</sup> has ventured into several family businesses since independence. He built a cement house, adjoining which he later constructed a *kiosk*, and bought a small truck. His economic standing seems well above the average for the region, but his diversified domestic economy epitomises several family dynamics encountered in Lautém. The labour activities in Pitinumalai’s domestic economy involve almost all the categories enumerated by the non-governmental organisation La’o Hamutuk, the Timor-Leste Institute for Development Monitoring and Analysis, for the sources of income in Timor-Leste as shown in Figure 9.1.

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3 This is not his real name, but comes from a stock of Cailoru people’s personal names.

## What do Timorese people do for work?

Population aged 15-64: 672,000

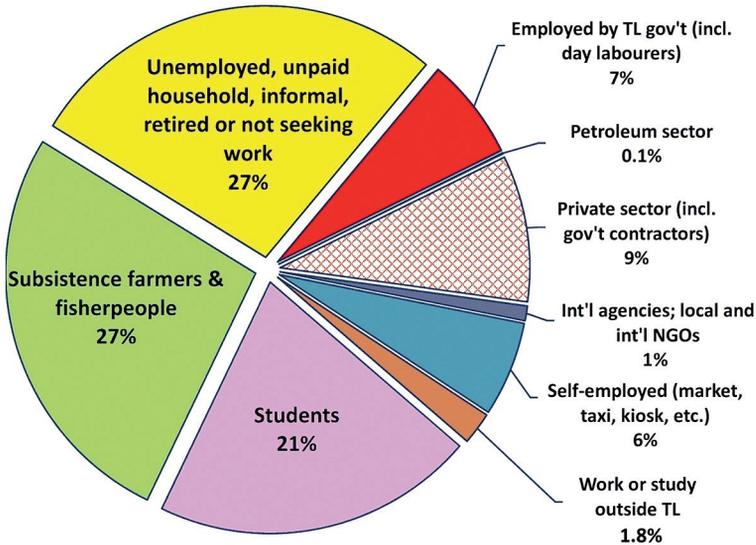


Figure 9.1. Graph by La'o Hamutuk based on information from the 2017 State Budget and 2015 Census.

Source: Scheiner (2017: 5). Based on information from the 2017 State Budget, 2015 Census, 2015 Business Activities Survey, 2013 Labor Force Survey and La'o Hamutuk research and estimate, March 2017.

As a teacher, Pitinimalai belongs to the 7 per cent of the population employed directly by the government; his daughter is among the 21 per cent who are students; himself (with the small truck) and his son-in-law (who was to drive the minibus he was about to buy) pertain to the 6 per cent of self-employed; and his cousin, who migrated to Ireland, is part of the around 2 per cent who work abroad. Living in rural Assalaino, he is also among the 27 per cent of subsistence farmers and fisherpeople in Timor-Leste.

In 2014, Pitinimalai decided to make a new investment, buying a *mikrolet* to provide transport in Dili. This vehicle was to be driven by his daughter's husband in Dili, where the couple lived. Pitinimalai placed the business management in the hands of his wife in Assalaino. By June 2014, the month we arrived in Lautém, Pitinimalai had already bought his vehicle. This enabled me to witness some of the difficulties that arose during the process of actually taking full possession of the minibus. Pitinimalai bought his vehicle in Kupang (Western Timor, Indonesia) at a cost of

US\$7,500. He expected his business in Dili would make US\$2,000 per month, which in our view was a realistic estimate. In fact, as Dili represents a growing urban centre, the *mikrolet* business flourishes every year. It should also be noted that since 2008 *mikrolet* business may gain support from the government.<sup>4</sup>

Although the acquisition of a motor vehicle is an act primarily determined by financial capacity, there were complications that meant the process of buying the *mikrolet* and taking it to Assalaino took several months. Unexpectedly, when the *mikrolet* (already paid for Pitinimalai) arrived at the Timorese–Indonesian border in July 2014, it was seized by the authorities. Legislation, of which he was unaware, prevented the import of vehicles more than 10 years old, and his was manufactured in 2003. For two months, Pitinimalai tried to solve the problem from his home in Lautém, but he finally realised he had to travel across the country to the border post in order to sort it out. In September, he took off and spent two weeks in the border town of Atambua. He later explained he was trying to implement a strategy similar to the one he was used to as an active member of the resistance against Indonesia. He took part in festivities with the border officers, attempting to find a Timorese or, better still, a Fataluku-speaker from his native Lautém. He needed ‘accomplices’ to turn a blind eye to the fact that the number plate of his *mikrolet* was hidden, thus allowing him to transport the vehicle across the border. He also directly confronted the Indonesian officers at the border by raising the issue of the tense Timor-Leste–Indonesia relations, challenging his opponents with moral questions, such as: ‘What is the nature of the bilateral relations between Timor-Leste and Indonesia?! Is Timor-Leste a garbage depot?!’ When he was finally on the Timorese side of the border, he took the route to Dili, where he was helped by former combatants from the resistance era – also from Lautém – to get legal paperwork for the *mikrolet*. In October, four months after its purchase in Kupang, his *mikrolet* finally arrived in Assalaino.

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4 It was possible that he might receive a state grant for ‘providing a social price to the public’ as a *mikrolet* operator, as is in the legislation *Decreto-Lei* 28/2008 (in *Jornal da República* 2008: 2560–2561).

## *Lutur mara*: The ceremony for the prosperity of the *mikrolet* business

A ceremony organised for Pitinumalai's minibus, was supposed to take place in July, but had been continuously postponed. In Fataluku, this sort of ceremony is called *lutur mara* ('to go to the grave'). Ressleroro, one of Pitinumalai's kinsmen, was in charge, since he is the person responsible for any ceremony that involves people in their kin group. In general terms, *lutur mara* corresponds to a 'flow-blessing ceremony' (Scheffold 2001). This involves thanking the ancestors for the benefits they have provided and, critically, asking for the ancestors to protect the new business. However, the *lutur mara* for Pitinumalai's *mikrolet* integrated various other facets of action directed at future prospects, relevant for an ethnographic analysis of hope.

On 5 October 2014, the much-anticipated ceremony finally took place. We all drove to Assalaino's old village (*lata matu*) where the graves and tombs of the direct descendants of a particular ancestor are located. Among them was Pitinumalai's father's father – Zemalai. Zemalai was the main focus of the ceremony, which took place around his grave. On arriving at the 'entrance' to the *lata matu* (the old village), Ressleroro got out of the *mikrolet* and started circling it with two coins in his hand, speaking ritual words in a low voice. The role of the coins was to break any existing link with the *mikrolet*'s previous owner. As Pitinumalai argued: 'We bought it from other people who may have used it for stealing or other wrongdoing, so we have to cleanse it with coins'. Cleaning it from the former owner was also the final act in the transaction of the *mikrolet* – to effect a proper change of ownership. It reveals a lot about temporality, creating a drastic rupture to any history still contained within the vehicle – creating a separation from the vehicle's past – and its present and future, placing it within the new family network. After circling the vehicle with the coins, Ressleroro placed the coins, together with an egg and some rice by the entrance to the cemetery, and the *mikrolet* moved ahead to stand next to the grave around which the remainder of the ceremony was performed (see Figure 9.2).



Figure 9.2. The *mikrolet* next to the graves.

Source: Photo taken by the author in 2014.

As soon as the vehicle parked, five men climbed onto the grave of Pitinimalai's father's father, Zemalai. Subsequently, Ressler started addressing the ancestor. A circle of men stood on top of the grave and participated in a conversation, partially in ritual speech. The ancestor Zemalai was part of this conversation, not just because the relatives talked to him, but also through his material presence in the *na'otu* – a stone placed on the grave at the time of his burial and meant to serve as a communication device between the living and the dead. Through the *na'otu*, Zemalai was offered food, cigarettes and drinks, and this presented a way in which those standing on top of the grave who were drinking beer established a connection with their paternal forefather. While this rather informal conversation was going on, Ressler spoke in a constant rhythm of ritual speech evoking many names, including those of other ancestors, but also 'general' names of people from the kin groups from which the ancestors' spouses had come (the 'wife-givers', or *ara ho pata*). This is relevant inasmuch as it helps to understand how these ceremonies – even if restricted to what Schefold (2001: 369) names an 'ancestral flow' blessing – also integrate forces of an 'affinal flow' blessing. Ancestrality is first of all a matter of belonging to the same *ratu* (clan or origin group). *Ratus* are patrilineal descent groups, excluding women for most matters, such

as direct communication with ancestors. They are, however, mentioned as affines and, as this case study will make clear, they may become important mediators between male agnatic kin.

As these informal conversations and ritual speech were taking place on the grave, a group of youths, Ressleroro's and Pitinumalai's sons, slaughtered a sacrificial pig. They did so with expertise, accompanied by the sound of loud, funny music. After being dismembered, the pig was cooked in a great pan over a fire under a tree. Then men climbed down from the grave and gathered around the fire, joining their sons and other men from different villages, but of the same *ratu*. Members of the same *ratu* share a 'common grandfather/ancestor', *calu ukane*, sharing sacrificial meat. Pitinumalai's son-in-law (who belongs to a different *ratu*) and the women (who also come from a different *ratu*), and myself, moved away towards the *mikrolet*, where we drank coconut water. Half an hour after the sharing of sacrificial food had started, and men were chatting and laughing seated in a circle, I had been kindly asked to go away. Pitinumalai then explained to me I had to bring the fruit juices (which I had bought in the village, under his instructions, before the ceremony started), and give personally one can of juice to each man seated in the circle. This, I imagine, closed my involvement. The following day, Pitinumalai's daughter gently offered me a film she made of the full ceremony and so I have been able to watch the final moment when the head of the pig, already clean of meat, was put on Zemalai's *na'otu*.

An important ceremonial element took place before sharing the meat, namely the divinatory act (*ari*) performed by reading the sacrificial pig's pancreas. This means that it was critical that the pancreas be left intact when the pig was slaughtered. By then, young men brought the pancreas to Ressleroro who, in front of everyone (including myself, called to witness it), inspected it from all angles numerous times. Some people present became agitated: Pitinumalai said they had received 'a signal'. 'He has received it, but they [that is, Ressleroro and the others] are still in doubt about its full meaning'. It is important to understand how this sort of *ari* institutes tensions between kin. In fact, as Pitinumalai would later explain, the pancreas readings were all in his favour, but not all those involved – including Ressleroro – were happy about it. The reading meant Zemalai claimed a rehabilitation of his grave. This was a sensitive issue among Pitinumalai's relatives. In his own words, he had acted in a 'strategic' manner, first rehabilitating the graves of the spouses who did not require any ceremonial attention, hoping this would make the ancestors Zemalai

and Nomalai jealous, subsequently claiming, as they did, for their own graves to be rehabilitated. Pitinimalai knew that if he had asked Ressiloro and the other elders to rehabilitate the ancestors' graves, they would not comply. In the following week, Pitinimalai bought cement to renovate the graves in question, thereby contributing to existing *lutur ubupai* (literally, rehabilitating a grave).

In sum, if the *mikrolet* ceremony's goal was to address 'the uncertainties and contingencies of social life' (McWilliam 2011: 71), and to protect the new business venture, assuring its prosperity, it also constituted new relationships between kin alive and dead. The ceremony for the *mikrolet* revealed specific ways in which prosperity and hope intertwine with negotiations of relationships in the present and future – a case I have put forward through the focus on the demand of the rehabilitation of graves.

## Conclusion

Among the Fataluku in Lautém, a region in Timor-Leste where no major investment project is anticipated in the near future, and where resistance to Indonesian occupation was particularly generalised, domestic economies become the focus of practices to bring about prosperity. This means that, on the one hand, hope for prosperity emerges from a contrast with past times (that is, the Indonesian occupation), which is regarded as a period of obstruction, poverty and humiliation. On the other hand, I have emphasised how prosperity and hope is inserted in small-scale family economies, showing it actually depends on webs of relationships throughout the country and intense relations of kin between Lautém and Dili.

*Lutur mara* and *ari* allow us to understand the role of the ancestors in this temporal connection between the past and the future. Communication with the ancestors goes well beyond the purposes of controlling destiny or requesting blessing. Resuming Bloch and Parry's argument on different transactional orders, one may claim that, in this case, there is a clear complementarity between transactions inscribed in the more material and short-term forms of retribution, and those in the long term, in which 'the two cycles are represented as organically essential to each other' (Bloch and Parry 1989: 25). The ethnographic analysis shows that the blessing for the *mikrolet* venture, together with establishing the need to rehabilitate the graves, makes explicit a network of relations with the ancestors that

goes beyond a simple counter-gift. Rather, it combines both short-term and long-term retributions that bring about an increasing integration of kinsfolk – including those who are now in their graves – that extends time. Existing tensions with the memory of the resistance era, as well as multiple forms of solidarity among those who took part in that struggle, are all part of this process. In this chapter, I have argued that, taken as an ethnographic category, hope among the Fataluku underlies this expansion of both temporalities and social networks of which ancestors are not only an integral part but also play a key role (see also Barnes and Trindade, Chapter 8) – namely, ancestors mediate tensions among kind, integrating short-term and long-term cycles of exchange. Their continuous presence transforms each small project of prosperity into a larger event in time and place.

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