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‘The Geographical Tour’

With the rice harvest over, it was time for me to travel back to Dili to join Russell, my university colleague, and 20 of our geography students on a two-week study tour around Timor-Leste. During this field class, which I coordinate annually, staff and students are hosted in local communities and accompanied around the country by Timorese NGO the Haburas Foundation and a number of Timorese university students. The Haburas Foundation is East Timor’s longest running environmental organisation, committed to enabling social justice and cultural preservation. It was founded by a group of RENETIL student resistance activists in the late 1990s and its inaugural and longstanding former director is Demetrio de Carvalho do Amaral. I have worked in a research capacity with Haburas for more than a decade, and Demetrio and his late wife Santi are Zeca’s godparents.

We began planning for this field class in 2012, many years before it materialised. The communities we visit have long-term relationships with Haburas, which has helped local people establish the community-based tourism operations in the places we stay. Haburas staff are also long-time civil society actors and researchers into Timor-Leste’s developing land laws, advocating consistently for the fulsome recognition of customary land and resource governance. As well as providing much-needed support to a range of community tourism initiatives across the country, our field class is a contribution to this activism at a number of levels. In 2018, Demetrio became the country’s secretary of state for the environment, a position that allows him to exercise greater influence over environmental policies and practices in the new nation. While this has meant he no longer joins the field class, since our first ‘tour’ in 2016 he has continued

to post on his social media pages about the field class and its engagement with rural communities. Our Haburas colleagues have dubbed the field class ‘the geographical tour’ and relish the opportunity to fashion it as something distinct from the usual development-focused study tours that percolate the tiny nation.

The field class is not easy to coordinate and it takes commitment and determined effort by all of us to maintain, honour and grow these relationships. Of course, Haburas do not invite us to share in this journey lightly; each event they enable and invite us to participate in is carefully chosen. Likewise, the Timorese communities we visit along the way have already carefully considered what they will share with our group and what should remain hidden from view; what will be included in, and what should be excluded from, our discussions.

Sometimes, during such encounters, the circumstances change and our hosts might decide to go further with what they want to share so that insider views and practices cross over into the public space. Usually this depends on the mood engendered, the energies generated by the group encounter and people’s level of comfort with how the moment unfolds. For example, during the 2017 field class, one encounter at an origin house complex in the mountainous heart of the country involved the impromptu ritual sacrifice of a chicken and an augury, or reading of its entrails—an event that was both unexpected and deeply shocking for the students, a number of whom were vegan. Yet, for our host community, absorbed in the emotion of this particular event and intent on honouring Haburas and their special guests, this ritual symbolised the greatest honour they could bestow on our group, a sacrificial and celebratory act that would ensure the ongoing wellbeing and life flourishing of all concerned.

All of us involved in the organisation of the tour take a calculated risk in opening up ourselves, and our relationships of mutual trust, to ever-inquisitive newcomers: students from the University of Melbourne and Timor’s national university. These newcomers are invited to learn from, witness, celebrate, record and contribute to the tour, and to relish in the intercultural encounters that work and to think together with us through those things that don’t work and from which we can perhaps all learn more.

The tour works at many levels, taking up paths across the country, across histories, across cultures and across ourselves. The sharing of stories, the rhythms of various lifestyles and styles of communication, the grasping for relationships, the difficulties in the moments of miscommunication and in the cross-cultural confusion of some of these encounters are, for me, both the greatest joys and challenges of these two weeks. Such learning is never straightforward and there are many competing understandings and multiple expectations of what is happening, what is desirable and what is being desired in any given moment or encounter. Each year, a number of Timorese university students also join us on the tour and, without exception, they are excited for the opportunity to exchange ideas and learn with their Australian counterparts. Very often these students are learning about their own country at the same time. While all are familiar with and immersed in Timorese customary worlds, the fact that the tour prioritises and seeks out rural Timorese philosophies and practices comes as something of a revelation to many of them. On one occasion, early on in our time in the far east of the country, a young male Timorese student sought me out to express his concern that the Australian students were learning too much myth and not enough science.

During the third of these study tours that took place in 2018, our lead counterpart from the Haburas Foundation was Pedrito Vieira, a lean, tall man descended from Fataluku-speaking royalty. Pedrito was a former FALINTIL guerrilla and student resistance activist, and the son of the former (pro-integrationist) district administrator of Lautem. When he was jailed in Jakarta for his resistance activities, his father visited him there. Despite their political differences, the old man tearfully expressed his pride in his son for having such conviction to fight for what he believed in. Pedrito's late grandfather was a powerful man in the customary context, considered by many to be the king for the entire Lautem region.

After two days in Dili being briefed at Haburas headquarters, visiting the National Resistance Museum and the new National Centre for Memory, we set off for Pedrito's homeland. Leaving Dili we followed the entire north-eastern coast until we reached the tiny fishing village of Com. Pedrito's pick-up truck led our six-vehicle convoy all the way. Once we had passed through the border dividing Baucau and Lautem,

I felt Pedrito's disposition change and something else manifest. I could even detect a more assured driving style in the lead vehicle now we were in Pedrito's territory.

Com is situated on the edge of the country's first national park, a park named after the Fataluku-speaking FALINTIL resistance leader Nino Konis Santana. The heavily forested region and its mountainous caves had protected Santana and his men while they fought a guerrilla war against the Indonesian army for two and half decades. On our first night in Com we were welcomed into the village with a dance show performed by dozens of girls and a few boys. On this occasion, the girls were particularly impressive as they alternated between groups dressed in *tais* that performed traditional Fataluku dance, and short skirts and neckties reminiscent of American cheerleading. It seemed like the whole village had also come out to watch.

Earlier in the evening, Pedrito had introduced us to this place and explained how it had become a village during the Indonesian occupation. The entire population of the more mountainous inland region had been forced to move down to the coast. They were compelled by circumstance to give up their lives as farmers and learn to become fishermen. The population settled in a cleared section of a narrow coastal roadside where their life was highly controlled. Food was limited and the threat of violence ever present under severe repression by the Indonesians, who were trying to flush out the sympathisers of the FALINTIL. People could not travel far without raising suspicion, so agricultural activities were now very limited. In the beginning, they only had seed from the coastal tamarind trees to eat. That's why they began fishing.

Pedrito's voice broke as he explained this history to the group. I didn't need to look up; I could already feel what was happening. Each year on the tour we will experience moments like this, moments where it is suddenly no longer possible to keep a collective lid on the emotional well of the past. Somehow he managed to recompose himself and continue. As usual in these moments, it was hard for me to keep translating; I needed to stare at the ground to keep my emotions in check. Pedrito told us that during this early period the troops would go from house to house searching for FALINTIL supporters. Sometimes families would be forced to offer someone up just to placate the Indonesian forces. The story of Com is also Pedrito's story. The pain in his voice was almost unbearable. But his will to tell the story, to have us witness and honour the dead, was even stronger.

I found out later from another local man that his village was also in the hills above Com. He said that in the early 1980s his entire village was razed to the ground and all their animals were killed. The Indonesian military had been responsible for the incursion, I presumed. 'No,' he corrected me. 'By the FALINTIL forces.' He didn't elaborate other than to add that as a young boy it was very traumatic to see all their animals being killed and that the family had moved to another village. I was left reeling. When I asked Pedrito about such acts of violence by FALINTIL, he said it was likely carried out in retaliation towards the Indonesian military who were stationed in the village, not necessarily against the villagers themselves. Nonetheless, I cannot share these discussions with the students. I would not know where to start.

The next day, we visited a place dubbed 'Xanana's house' by everyone in Com, including the young kids (though I expect this is a fiction). What we saw was an 'eco-lodge' with various brick structures and a plunge pool languishing half built at the end of the new road leading from Com into the heart of the national park. People told us that a worker fell off the roof during construction a year ago, and that he was either still in hospital or dead. It seemed from various reports that the project had been abandoned for the time being. '*La halo on* [they have stopped it now]', said the kids on the beach. The owners of our guesthouse were more positive, suggesting that construction would soon commence. It was the guesthouse owners' clan who had authorised the building on the site and they were hoping that they would be offered the contract to manage the lodge.

Xanana's house has a bigger story. As my colleague Andrew McWilliam has written elsewhere, a new road to the government-funded eco-lodge has opened the gates for a local return to gardening and house building inside the national park. As our group walked along the newly graded road to Xanana's house, we noticed many new houses and elaborate vegetable gardens in construction. In other places, we saw what looked like new or refurbished stone and carved wooden objects, similar to those marking ancestral ceremony sites across the Fataluku landscape. To my surprise, there were even what looked like picnic spots with new seating fashioned out of wood. We stopped by one of these areas at a beautiful, long, white sand beach renowned for turtle nesting.

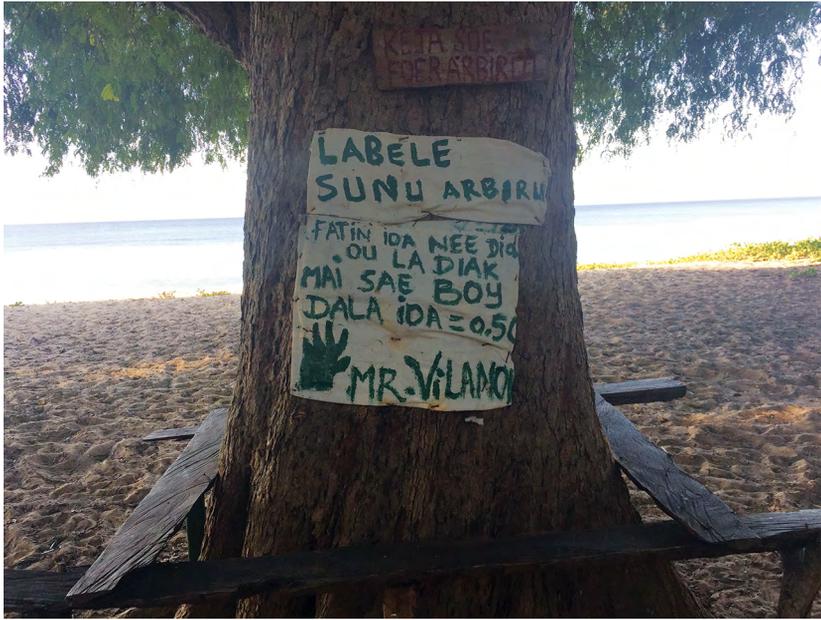


Photo 42: The 50-cent swing beach.

For reasons that became apparent, the children in Com know this area as *boy fatin* (the swing place). When we arrived, we were approached by an elderly man who lived in a newly constructed house nearby. He had created this picnic spot, as well as an elaborate swing made from fishing nets that was hanging from a branch. While we ventured out on the squeaky white sands to dip our feet in the turquoise sea and enjoy a quick rest (it was still a way to Xanana's house), the old man walked over and sat by the swing. He then told Atoo, one of the staff from Haburas, that our group would need to pay him 50 cents each for swimming at the beach. Atoo was surprised by a request for private payment in a national park and politely enquired as to the basis for the charge, at which point the old man indicated a handpainted sign in Tetum that was nailed to the tree by the swing. It had clearly been written by someone else, perhaps a park ranger, trying to placate the old man's pecuniary interests. Atoo didn't have the heart to tell him the actual wording of the sign: 'Whoever wants to play on this swing must pay fifty cents a turn.' While the children in Com may have coveted the swing, it was the beach that attracted foreign tourists and the beach for which the old man was seeking access payments.

Later that afternoon we visited an origin house belonging to Konu Ratu, the landowning clan of Com. We were accompanied by Pedrito and Senhor Fransisco, a senior clan member. The elaborately stylised and decorated wooden house, elongated on stilts with black palm–fibre thatching in classical Fataluku style, was situated by the beach road at the entrance to the village. It had been reconstructed in 2006 with funding from Portuguese donors whose name was now engraved on its front panelling. 'Fataluku origin houses are very expensive to build,' Senhor Fransisco told us. In the past, only certain clans could afford them. One of wealthier clans was the royal house of the region, Pedrito's own Chailoro. It was they, said Senhor Fransisco, who were responsible for supporting the Konu Ratu to build their houses both materially through marriage exchange between the houses and spiritually through ritual advice on the house-building process. The rebuilding of the Chailoro Ratu house would be an even larger undertaking.

Senhor Fransisco pointed out the Konu Ratu's original village site, which was in a coconut grove on an elevated ridge some distance from the coast. Konu Ratu sacred houses had been located there in the past. Nonetheless, he was quick to assert that Konu Ratu have always owned this land by the coast even if they had not always occupied it. Given our proximity to the sea, the students asked him if he was worried about the impact of sea level rise on the origin house built in this location. 'No,' he replied. 'The sea knows its boundaries.' The confidence in this statement was due to the large trees by the beach on the other side of the road that marked an ancestral border. 'The sea respects this,' he said. The students were puzzled. I explained that in Timor, border agreements are frequently made not just between those living, but also between the living and the dead. The trees were the living embodiment of that agreement.

Later, one of the students wondered at Senhor Fransisco's claims. Were they a sign of human arrogance: an assertion of mastery over nature? Another student remarked that she didn't see it as hubris because Fransisco was referring to an ancestral agreement between people and spirits of the sea. Neither observation left us any closer to unpacking the ramifications of climate change and sea level rise in the region. Anthropogenic climate change would have to be a discussion for another day.

Com's tourism peak was during the time of the United Nations peacekeeping missions. Given that few tourists come to Com these days, as soon as our vehicles drove into the village, the local kids had made

a beeline for the beachside edges of our guesthouse. Small groups of siblings of all ages intently worked the zone, imploring the students to make a purchase. It was hard for the students to resist the onslaught and most bought something. Before we left Com, Pedrito made an announcement requesting the students to surrender the handmade shell necklaces they had bought from local children on the beach. 'Don't worry,' said Pedrito, 'you will get them back when we return to Baucau.' The students looked perplexed, perhaps sheepishly wondering if they shouldn't have been trading in local shell life after all. I don't think any of them expected what came next. Pedrito explained that we were about to leave Com and visit a large freshwater lake, Iralalaru, on the raised plateau in the middle of the national park. In the lake region, the Fataluku customarily do not allow the mixing of freshwater and saltwater substances. Were we to take these shells from the sea up into the lake area, we could bring calamity upon all. The request to hand them in was so they could be stored in a relative's house before we entered the lake region.

The Konis Santana National Park is an International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) community-protected area. At the lake, we met with one of the lake custodians, Senhor Hermingildo, and a park ranger. The old man arrived on the back of his son's motorbike; he wore farm clothes and gumboots almost as long as his legs and carried only a small pouch containing betel chew, some uncooked rice and an egg. The park ranger, who we had picked up on our way through the nearby village, was dressed in a badged uniform and carried a clipboard fastening several pages of typed text. The latter was a long list of the scientific names of endemic tree and animal species identified by foreign researchers working in the national park. Later, when answering the array of questions posed by the students about the national park, he would periodically scan this list for any useful information he could add. For the ranger, the list was a necessary public declaration of state authority over the area.

As in previous years, the lake custodian carried out a ceremony at the Irasiqiru river, a watercourse that runs out from the lake before disappearing down a sinkhole several kilometres downstream. The ceremony involved cracking an egg by the river and sprinkling some rice grains into the water. At the same time, the lake custodian blew onto the foreheads of Russell and me, as the group's representatives. He was letting the non-human custodians of the lake know that our group was visiting. He also checked with us as to whether any of our group from the previous year had gotten sick or had some disaster befall them. (In fact, one student had been

hospitalised in Baucau following our last visit to the Irasiqiru. But we didn't mention this incident to the lake custodian because, after much discussion, the Haburas staff had attributed the student's illness to an attack by land spirits on the island of Jaco. While Russell and I were busy with the student in the hospital, they had been privately busy organising a spiritual intervention to counter the attack. The student remained unaware of the full treatment they had received to recover their health.)

Russell explained the geomorphology underpinning the formation of the lake's karst landscape and what is known about its complex hydrogeology from the perspective of Western science. Senhor Hermingildo, meanwhile, told the students the story of the lake's origins—of how a village lay in the centre of the once dry area until, one day, waters rose up out of the ground, swallowing the village and most of its people. Senhor Hermingildo said that sometimes the custodians beneath the lake still seek out the company of descendants from this village and, to do this, they must take a life from this world into theirs. He tells us that his own sister was harvesting watercress in the river one day when she was taken by one of the ancestral crocodiles.



Photo 43: Students at Iralalaru and the Irasiqiru river (Demetrio speaking with Senhor Hermingildo standing at rear).

Source: Russell Drysdale.

The students asked Senhor Hermingildo how he became a custodian of the lake. He explained that he had been chosen by the spirits of the lake:

You will know when you have been chosen, but you may hide it from others. Others will notice, though, when you start to change and know things and do things you didn't before.

These spirit communications were first conveyed to him in dreams. The students wondered about who would take over from him. He disclosed that this worried him. People would continue to be chosen by the spirits, as he had been, but would the newer generations be receptive to their gift? Would they even be prepared to take on the responsibility? He was not sure. With his own two sons working overseas in England and Australia, he could not be certain about them taking on his role. The students were surprised that his family members were so far way. As far removed from their own reality as this place seemed, its people are, like them, deeply embedded in a globalised world. In recent years, Timor-Leste's largest non-oil export has been sending workers to the developed world. Tellingly, many of the two-storey concrete houses springing up around the edges of the lake were built from the remittances provided by family members who work overseas, mostly in meatworks and other factories in Ireland and England.

The previous year our conversation with Senhor Hermingildo had taken a very different turn. The pressing matter at that time was the infighting that had been observed between the crocodiles of the lake. One particularly vicious fight had ended in the death of a large male crocodile. Senhor Hermingildo's voice dropped as he pointed out an area further downstream away from the lake's edge and offered a revelation that upturned any idea we might have had that this was a 'natural' battle of territorial animals:

Just over there is where they meet. The crocodile commanders of the lake. Each of them represents one of the seven clans with custodial responsibilities for the area. They meet here regularly to negotiate with each other.

People in the area understood that something had gone wrong to upset this normal course of negotiation. The alliance between the commanders had been broken and they had turned on each other. The root cause was thought to be disharmony in the community of the living. Tensions from this realm had spread into the ancestral realm. The death of a crocodile

commander had given everyone living around lake pause for reflection and deep concern. Recounting the story in Fataluku and then retelling it to me in Tetum so I could translate it into English for the students also gave Senhor Hermingildo, Pedrito, the park ranger and other Haburas staff and locals time to ruminate on the issues under discussion. As I translated the long and culturally complex explanations of the lake area that were given to me, all of the others would be engaged together in very lively conversation in Fataluku. The students looked on, mystified.

The locals told us that they didn't know exactly why their ancestors were fighting; they were still trying to get to the bottom of the conflict. Senhor Hermingildo and others had been to the commanders' site to carry out a ceremony and ask for peace to be restored in the ancestral world. They mentioned one suspicion that the cause was due to breaches in cultural protocols relating to development in the area. They recounted how a local village chief, who had recently brought a truckload of sand from the sea to use in a large two-storey house construction around the lake, had later suffered the death of all his buffalo.

They told us, and we could see ourselves from their animated discussions, that they needed to assess very carefully these happenings in the 'natural' world and respond accordingly. Later on in the afternoon, two of these commanders came patrolling downriver. The intimidatingly larger of the two travelled past where our group was gathered some distance from the banks and turned 180 degrees in the water. There it lay for a long time, staring at us. No wonder Senhor Hermingildo was keen to know that we had all been okay on our return to Australia.

Crocodiles are always a frequent topic of conversation on the study tour. In order to properly nourish these human–animal relationships and to respect their boundaries, in some parts of Timor where crocodiles are prevalent, customary elders have communicative ritual responsibilities referred to as 'marrying crocodiles' (*kaben ho lafaek*). Very often, we hear, it is people who do not pay enough respect to either these cross-species connections or these boundaries who are the subject of attack. Crocodile attacks are increasing; statistically, people in Timor are now 10 times more likely to die from crocodile attack than from malaria (a disease that is trending in the opposite direction). DNA research by Australian scientists is investigating whether there are links between increased Timorese crocodile attacks and foreign crocodiles journeying across the Timor Sea from the overpopulated crocodile territories of northern

Australia. The Timorese are very interested in this research into 'wild' crocodiles and the implications it may have for the relationships between customary communities and their ancestral crocodiles. In the meantime, the government has placed bright yellow crocodile dangers signs at known crocodile sites around the country, including the place where we sat that day by the Irasiqiru.

After we heard from Senhor Hermingildo, the rangers spoke with us about their ongoing struggles to manage the conservation values of the national park. As an IUCN community-managed park, timber felling and hunting are not banned in their entirety, but management does seek to regulate these activities. There is much confusion about the rules and a fear of complete hunting bans. The park rangers explained that they are desperately under-resourced and must *lao ho liman mamuk* (walk country with empty hands). With little in the way of resources or enforcement powers, they must use their customary negotiation skills to work through customary elders like Senhor Hermingildo to address illegal activities. Their jobs as mediators between local people and the state, while critical and very difficult, were not properly recognised by either party. But, as one ranger said: 'I do it for my nation.'

The following day, another custodian of the national park area, Senhor Nus, took us to visit a cave where his ancestors had lived and where some were buried. Senhor Nus had resided in Indonesia for some time and had only relatively recently returned to the area. He was now determined to reassert his custodial responsibilities for the site and had immediately started working at the Valu Sere beach bungalows (tourist accommodation established in 2007 by a collective of the area's landowning clans). On the main road descending from the lake towards the cave and the coastal community tourism establishment, a new official sign read: 'Lene Ara Archaeological site 200 metres this way'. During our visit to the cave, I asked about this new sign. Senhor Nus confirmed that it had been put there by staff from the Ministry of Culture and expressed his concern. The custodians of the area had asked for government protection in addition to the traditional stone barrier outside the cave marking out the area as a *lulik* space. During the occupation, many such caves had been inhabited by FALINTIL hiding in the jungle. It was this *lulik*, manifest in different ways and sites across the whole area, that is credited for keeping the fighters alive. At the time, the resistance fighters did not need special permission to enter caves because the period was understood by the living and the ancestral realm alike as a 'state of emergency'. The land and spirits

understood that people needed their protection without them having to first seek it. But things were different now. The ancestors were demanding their dues and, consequently, the people were reinstating their careful custodial responsibilities and communications with the ancestral realm. When we left the cave, the custodians lingered to say a small prayer before leaving some coins on the rock as an offering. What effect the new sign on the road and unchecked visitation would have on the relationships with the ancestors was, as yet, unknown.

While the Timorese university students who accompany us each year readily invoke their own ancestral relationships and responsibilities, as is the case for most Timorese engaged in formal education, they are also devout Christians. The Australian students are always surprised to learn that these ostensibly modern and highly fashion-conscious young students, who seem to share with them similar dreams and aspirations for the future, might also attend church services in Dili every day of the week. One morning over breakfast at Valu Sere, I was chatting with two of the female Timorese students, Mafi and Ti. They were looking to me for some clarity following a bewildering conversation with some of the Australian students with whom they were beginning to form close friendships. 'They don't believe in God!' said Mafi. 'One said they believe in "spirit" but which spirit? Who looks after them when they travel far? What is the purpose of their life?' Before I could answer, they told me that they had tried to reassure the students that God loves them in any case, even if they didn't believe. Ti told me how she had just been to Japan on a study tour. Although a fervent believer in God (for her, God comes first), she had rung her parents in her home village while she was in Japan and asked them to seek the protection of the ancestors of their origin house while she was away.

Obviously appreciating the chance to speak frankly on these matters, Mafi added that she would put her relationship with her ancestors before God, but she reiterated that both were important to her. What had really floored them was the Australian students' lack of relationship with the divine or the ancestral world. 'What do they believe in?' they asked me with concern. '*Sira fiar an,*' I offered weakly. 'They believe in themselves.' 'Oh my God,' said Ti, completely incredulous. 'It is unbelievable. I feel sorry for them.'

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