Epilogue

In many ways, the themes that animate this book—those of family and kinship, wild spirits and ancestors, development, tradition and modernity—remain as relevant to our lives on the outside as they remain for those inside Timor-Leste. These threads form the broader cloth from which Timorese people’s worlds, and our own, are continually woven and brought into being. Across the island, people are always attuned to the flows between diverse and disparate forms of life, ways to honour family collectivities and to find new pathways for incorporating others. The flows and communications between people, other beings and things across time and place open up spaces for the creation and negotiation of these worlds. People are also attuned to the theatrics that infuse the politics of development and new nation building, processes about and through which they are in continual multisensory and often lively conversation. During a visit to Timor-Leste in late 2019, the monsoonal rains hadn’t yet come and wherever we went in the east we heard a common explanation: the Chinese companies contracted by the government to build the multimillion-dollar roads under construction had been counter-seeding the clouds, ensuring the rains would hold off so they could get their roads built and contracts fulfilled. The various actors and agencies brought into causal relationship through these conversations are rooted in particular understandings of the world and are, for outsiders, often surprising. Very often, they also reveal deep insights into variously entangled micro and macro processes.

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It’s late 2020 and I am at home in Melbourne with Quin and the kids. The year 2020 began for us with the required house-warming party in Bercoli. We had just settled into the new house and had completed connecting the water supply to the outdoor kitchen and bathroom. It was time to hold the final ceremony to ask the spirits of the Ocabai spring, from where the water was pumped, for permission to permanently use this water and to bless the house.
On the day of the ceremony, the extended family from up on the main road begin to drift down. Two nieces brought with them huge cauldrons for cooking and a large wooden and metal scraping instrument for grating coconut flesh. To please the kids and in a break from tradition, we would also make *katupa* for the ceremony feast—rice cooked with spiced coconut milk in palm-sized woven baskets. The *katupa* cases had been made the day before by the kids and their cousins from the fronds of the coconut palms that fringe the house.

Eventually almost everyone had arrived. The house was alive with activity. Tia Martina’s husband Tiu Antonio had brought along his beloved black dog, Captain, and our dog, Golden, spent most of the day trying to fend off his assaults. Zeca took shelter with him in one of the bedrooms.

We had secured a medium-sized goat for the offering at Ocabai. The ceremony would take place at the spring’s source around half a kilometre away, through a dense palm grove and up past the bee tree. While the women of the family prepared the *katupa* spices in the kitchen, Tiu Vicente (the Old Man’s chief ritual assistant on such occasions) took a snippet of the goat’s fur, a red rooster, betel nut and 12 coins (five plus seven) with him to the spring. When the Old Man rose to go with him, I made a move to follow with the video camera. The Old Man stopped me in my tracks. ‘*Feto sina la bele ba*’ ['Women can’t go’], he said quietly. I was getting used to this by now and I gave the camera to Quin, asked him to film the ceremony and headed back to the kitchen.
Photo 55: Cooking *katupa* by the kitchen.

The men followed the water channel upstream and placed the coins and betel nut by an altar at the spring source, circling the chicken five and seven times in the air. The Old Man made a prayer and asked for the blessings from the ancestors of the spring and associated Wai Daba origin house. By the time they returned to our house, the goat had been slaughtered and I was called from the kitchen to resume filming. The Old Man read the liver of the slaughtered goat. ‘All is good,’ he told me quietly, ‘although the ancestors are little angry.’ When I asked tentatively why this might be so, he said that Quin had been speaking out of turn. In recent days he had been badgering the Old Man and his brothers about when they were going to begin the reconstruction of the Wai Daba origin house. This had upset the Old Man and, it seemed, the ancestors. To speak on such matters so openly and within the domain of the rice fields meant that the reconstruction must begin immediately. As this was impossible, the ancestors were angered by the empty words. The Old Man made it clear they would need to be placated with the appropriate offerings at the next harvest ritual. The same message of displeasure showed up next in the Old Man’s reading of the sacrificed red rooster’s liver. When I relayed this message to Quin he dismissed it breezily. ‘The ancestors are happy that I am bringing these things up and moving them forward,’ he shot back. Thankfully the reading of the final liver, that of the white chicken, indicated that all was in order with our new house and its water supply.
Once the goat meat and rice were placed in bamboo lengths and cooked over the fire, certain portions were carried back to the spring for a final offering. On their return to the house, the brothers and Quin were joined by another relative, Achilles, and the four of them travelled along a route that took in a large rectangular perimeter of the forest-fringed house site. Achilles, one of the members of a newcomer family who is always faithful to the authority of the Old Man, placed offerings of the cooked meat and rice in each corner of the perimeter and finally in a central location in front of the house. This ensured that the ancestral spirits would both observe and maintain a border between the wild spirit world and our everyday living space.

When they arrived back to the house, I was again called from the kitchen to take over filming. The blood of the sacrificed white chicken was tipped into a freshly picked coconut, and the mixture of blood and coconut water was sprinkled by Achilles inside the house and around the garden. The coconut was then placed upturned on a log sticking up at the front of the house—a signal to all passers-by that the house was now properly blessed and protected. With the ritual proceedings now over, it was time for us to eat, drink and celebrate the end to a more than year-long construction. Concerned perhaps for my foreign predispositions, one of Tia Martina's
daughters who was recently returned from studying in Dili took me aside quietly and suggested it might have been better if we had had a Catholic priest bless the house. I don’t think she was sure what to make of me when I replied that such a priest might not be powerful enough for the task at hand.

Before he left that evening, Quin had told the Old Man I would be going to Portugal for a conference later in the year. ‘Be sure to bring back that book of our tax records,’ he reminded me sternly. This led in turn to another lengthy conversation with the other men present about what could be done about those others who were, in his view, intent on surreptitiously claiming parts of the valley as their own inheritance.

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I never did get to Portugal in 2020. Not long after we arrived back in Australia coronavirus emerged as a global pandemic and we pretty much stayed at home in Melbourne for the remainder of the year.

Often in the evenings around dinner time, Quin would sit at the dining table making phone calls to Timor to catch up on all the family news. In the beginning we were all very worried about the potential impact of COVID-19 in Timor-Leste. Early on the government closed the country’s borders and declared a state of emergency. As Timorese frequently do when they sense trouble, many left the capital just before a state of emergency was declared and returned to their home villages. Across the country, including at the Wai Daba spring, the lia na’in held ritual ceremonies to ask the ancestors for their assistance in combating COVID-19. These ceremonies were posted on social media and shared among families inside and outside Timor-Leste. The lia na’in addressed the disease as a living being and implored it not to travel to Timor-Leste.

Months later, the virus had yet to emerge outside of Dili, and while life in the capital was badly affected by the stay-at-home orders, in Bercoli, where people had access to their fields and a diversity of cultivated and wild foods, life went on as normal. One day, we called Tia Martina to ask how she was going. In 2019, her oldest daughter had left the village to work in England. The daughter’s husband, who was from elsewhere in Timor-Leste, had been working there in a factory for many years. Tia Martina was then left to care for three young grandchildren and, although she did not complain, it significantly added to the burden of her daily household and agricultural tasks. We wanted to know how the
young couple were going in England and whether they had been able to keep their jobs during the pandemic. Pleased we had called her to check in, Tia Martina exchanged pleasantries (which in these contexts take the form of much teasing) and then told us what she really thought of the current situation. While the incomes of those lucky enough to have a job in Dili and the remittances from those working overseas were highly valued and appreciated, what people in the village objected to was the sheer mass of underemployed youth who now resided in the capital. Tia Martina said that it was now clear, more than ever, that these largely idle youth needed to return permanently to the villages to help their families with the agricultural work and other household tasks.

Other than that, as had been the case in late 2019, her main concern remained the rain. The season’s rains had eventually arrived, but they were very late, delaying the sowing of staple crops. Tia Martina said she didn’t remember the rains being this late before. Then, towards the end of the severely delayed rainy season, widespread flooding affected much of the country. In badly affected regions, people had needed to rely on emergency food aid and international assistance.

These rural happenings reflect the paradox of development in Timor-Leste. While the local customary communities can often rely on their own strength and resilience to get them through tough times, increasingly extreme climate events and unexpected global shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic create deeper global entanglements that, in different ways, shape and contest both the promises of development and the implications of its underdevelopment.

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The worry about COVID-19 soon passed from them to us. A second-wave surge of the virus in Melbourne meant that we remained in lockdown. Meanwhile, across Timor it was wedding season. Quin’s nightly conversations turned to the customary negotiations around all the marriages being negotiated across the family network. Quin, who is always far less interested in all these details than me, would reluctantly engage in the banter, putting the phone on speaker so I could hear, too. Listening on the phone to various conversations about these often geographically far-flung marriages of the next generation of nieces and nephews, who was giving what, who withheld what, I am continually struck by these impressive feats of customary accounting and the associated flow charts.
Marriage practices may be changing, but they are still made legible and writ large through the customary machinations of extended family politics—machinations in which we, much to Quin’s consternation, were increasingly expected to play a part. While we were a long way from family, I was reminded of the fact that culture in Timor-Leste also has the knack of working its way from the inside out.

Many of these telephone conversations were between Quin and Tiu Juliao, the Old Man’s younger brother. The Old Man himself tends to leave these cross-island marriage negotiations concerning the Dili-based educated nieces and nephews to be overseen by this younger brother. Juliao is a relatively wealthy businessman in Dili and he is well connected to a certain strata of Dili society. It is always him, I notice, who steps to the fore when negotiations occur around these more ‘modern’ marriages. The Old Man reserves his skills for the more intense ritual negotiations of the village domain.

Later in September we spoke to the Old Man and he remained very concerned about the global COVID-19 pandemic and the situation in Melbourne. He reminded us about the efficacy of the ceremonies he carried out by the spring to ward off the virus and reflected on the power of the Wai Daba ancestors. ‘You lot take care of yourselves over there,’ he said, with deep concern for those living away from the hard-won protection of the ancestral hearth. We, meanwhile, look forward to our return.