

Afterword: Negotiating Tradition and Modernity

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Abstract

The closing commentary offers some insights into the development of transnational work beyond Timor-Leste and the financial rewards flowing back in support of familial and home-based spirit ecologies of practice. The transnational chain migration flowing out of Timor-Leste in recent decades to destinations such as the United Kingdom, Portugal, South Korea and Australia, has been transformative for participants and highly beneficial to increasing numbers of Timor-based households receiving cash remittance flows. In the process, new avenues for the expression and maintenance of reciprocal exchanges are being created and elaborated. The capacity to accumulate sufficient means to successfully negotiate new marriages and attendant costs in obligatory and reciprocal marriage exchange payments (T: *barlake*) is one such novel outcome of this process (Wu and McWilliam 2022). Elaborate burials and reburials of fallen family members and heroes of the resistance struggle is another, as is the renewed commitment to rebuilding *uma lulik* ancestral houses. In these and other ways contemporary Timorese society has become open to the new possibilities and opportunities of the wider world. Many now increasingly look to distant lands as both a highly desirable pathway to prosperity and one that offers the possibility of building sustainable livelihoods in Timor-Leste and supporting home communities in the process.

Keywords: Timor-Leste, Ritual house, custom, remittances, economy, post-independence

In the chaotic aftermath of 24 years of occupation, rural communities across Timor-Leste have embarked on the long and arduous process of social and economic recovery. For a majority of rural communities, this recovery has generally meant focusing on the rebuilding of household infrastructure and re-establishing food gardens and livestock as part of a phased return to the rhythms of seasonal agriculture. In the early years of freedom with highly constrained government services and support, the revival of customary gift exchange practices through kinship and affinal networks of support has provided a sustained basis for restoring local communities and reinvigorating customary forms of local governance (McWilliam and Traube 2011; Silva 2013). These practices reflect the importance accorded the ‘return to custom’, that has been observed across the country with

its many accompanying values including, group solidarity, reverence for ancestral agency, the reconstruction of ancestral origin houses (*uma lulik*) as well as support for ritual leadership in the management of local affairs (Hicks 2007; Barnes 2017).

Two decades on from independence, our series of detailed case studies, drawn from different regions of the country, demonstrate that the renewal and revitalisation of complex social and cultural exchanges remain a lively and engaging process of the co-production of custom and governance across scale. These ‘spirit ecologies’ of practice, as we interpret them, extend from the micro-social dynamics of households and strengthened domestic economies to broader issues of social alliance, resource entitlements, landed authority, and collective endeavour. In each of the case studies, we argue that these themes continue to inform and shape the organisation of social and political life in communities across the country. They highlight the counter-intuitive idea that the inventive practices of custom are really, thoroughly modern and endure because they engage and adapt to the changing requirements of contemporary events (McWilliam 2012: 73). These observations are widely evident across Timor-Leste and have been the subject of sustained research and critical analysis by multiple authors in recent years (examples include Silva (ed) et al. (2023), Bovensiepen (2018, 2018b), Rose (2020), and Kent (2024). As a collected archive of ethnographic analysis, these works illustrate the rich diversity of experience across Timor-Leste as communities and households strive to secure an economic prosperity built around the enduring ethics of customary governance. Moreover, in the changing patterns of work opportunities across Timor-Leste, these challenges are no more clearly seen than in the flow of remittances and savings generated by the burgeoning trend in Timorese temporary transnational labour migration to countries in the region and beyond.

Spirit Ecologies and Labour migration

Ritual exchange and cycles of gift giving among networks of familial relatives are particularly prominent in rural areas where gift exchange and debt obligations have traditionally provided sources of enduring social protection for households. The orientation to what we call ‘spirit ecologies’ persists despite substantial improvements in the provision of government services including education and financial transfers to many households (pensions and veterans’ payments), along with a widespread commitment to Catholicism and aspirations for a better life. These modernist influences are especially salient among families looking to improve their household wealth and status, and who might be resistant or even antagonistic to the demands of village-based spirit ecologies, even as complaining about cultural obligations is often part of the performative dynamics of participation.

Another prominent trend in post-independence Timor-Leste is the movement among young people away from the family farm in the villages to the towns and bright lights of the cities seeking new experiences and wider horizons. Dili has long been a favoured destination for aspiring youth with some eastern municipalities of Timor-Leste losing between 16 and 20% of their population over recent decades, mostly young people in search of employment (National Directorate of Statistics: 40).¹ With another 20-30,000 new graduates entering the job market every year, the competition for permanent jobs is fierce, and many struggle to secure regular or continuing work (Oxfam 2022).

In the face of these challenges, the growing shift to transnational labour migration in the form of temporary and circular periods of work overseas is offering new opportunities for aspiring young Timorese workers. Like their counterparts elsewhere in contemporary Southeast Asia and wider patterns of globalised labour, common push factors in Timor-Leste reflect the persistent economic insecurity in the countryside with low wages, and unemployment as prospective migrants seek pathways out of poverty and alternative means to support their families (e.g., Rigg and Vandergeest 2012; Inder 2023). Somewhat ironically, however, their success in these endeavours, and their strong sense of obligation to support their families provide a growing and important source of income and financial support for village-based cultural and customary practices. The following closing commentary offers some insights into the development of transnational work out of Timor-Leste and the financial rewards flowing back in support of familial and home-based spirit ecologies of practice.

Post-independence Pathways to Recovery

Informal Labour Migration

Post-independence Timor-Leste has seen two major developments of transnational labour migration. An initial and quite informal process of migration to Portugal and especially the United Kingdom, had its unlikely origins during the independence struggle in the mid-1990s. At this time, post-Santa Cruz, many young

¹ Inder (2023) has noted that even as agriculture remains the largest non-oil economic sector in Timor-Leste employing the largest number of people (228,000 working-age adults), the proportion of the working-age population participating in agriculture (either as workers or subsistence farmers) fell by 23.3% between 2013 and 2021. The greatest decline was among young men in agriculture with a consistent pattern of high levels of migration from rural to urban areas (mainly Dili) and growing levels of international out-migration.

Timorese student activists came under intense pressure from Indonesian security forces and fled into Indonesia seeking refuge and protection under the Indonesian student-based activist network, RENETIL (*Resistência Nacional dos Estudantes de Timor-Leste*). Many other young Timorese studying in Indonesia on Indonesian government scholarships were also recruited to join RENETIL's political activities. Between 1993 and 1996, hundreds of these young *clandestinos* were able to secure political asylum and safe passage to countries in Western Europe by occupying a series of Embassy compounds in Jakarta. Although most of these transplanted asylum seekers (*suaka politiku*) began their expatriate lives in Lisbon, Portugal, over time, a few made their way to centres such as London, Liverpool, and Oxford in Great Britain where they secured local support for their cause along with intermittent work to sustain their campaigns for independence (see Pinto and Jardine 1997). It is from the efforts of these unlikely pioneering settlers, who maintained their familial and political ties to Timor-Leste, that the labour migration of young East Timorese took root and expanded (McWilliam 2020). The pathways to Portugal and the United Kingdom in particular, then gradually expanded following independence and especially after 2010 when increasing numbers of young Timorese pursued the UK travel option, emboldened by the success of pioneering friends and acquaintances (Wigglesworth and Boxer 2019; McWilliam 2022).

The growth of Timorese labour migration to the United Kingdom has been entirely informal and spontaneous, relying for the most part on word of mouth and familial connections. But its success and sustained growth have depended on a series of vital enabling factors, including, in brief: (1) the decision by Portugal to recognise all Timor-Leste people born before 2002 (national independence) as Portuguese citizens and hence able to acquire passports that provided open access and work opportunities across the European Union. (2) The good fortune to find a sponsor in Lisbon who could facilitate the process of securing a Portuguese passport for Timorese applicants. These services were often undertaken by expatriate Timorese relatives familiar with the Portuguese bureaucracy and willing to offer their services. Initially at least, this very much favoured Fataluku Timorese who had strong connections in this regard. (3) At the time, the UK was experiencing an economic boom offering significant and comparatively well-paid work opportunities for low-skilled migrants with marginal English proficiency. (4) The deregulation of global airlines by 2010 dramatically reduced flight costs, offering labour migrants cut-price return airfares between Dili and Heathrow. (5) Finally, the dramatic rise and expansion of global telecommunications, the internet, and social media platforms extending into Timor-Leste created the possibility of fast, cheap communication between migrants and their erstwhile families back home. The internet fostered new economic imaginaries for many aspiring young Timorese facing bleak employment prospects at home and with little likelihood of improved conditions (McWilliam 2022 for further analysis).

For more than 20 years, this practice of travel and circular labour migration has flourished and expanded as increasing numbers of young Timorese took up comparatively well-paid, low-skilled employment in factories, restaurants, supermarkets, and hotels across England (*Inglatera*) and Northern Ireland (*Irlandia*) (McWilliam 2020). Living for the most part in group houses and sharing the costs of food and entertainment, money judiciously saved from low-wage shift work has formed the basis of a thriving cash remittance economy (McWilliam and Monteiro 2019). Just how many aspiring Timorese workers have participated in this migration is open to debate. The 2015 Timor-Leste National Census reported a total of 5,350 Timor-Leste citizens ‘living in European countries other than Portugal’ which, in fact referred to the United Kingdom (National Directorate of Statistics 2016). But this figure excluded large numbers of migrants who, at the time of recording, were visiting Timor-Leste for holidays, family commitments, or taking longer breaks between further periods of employment overseas. The popularity of working in the UK continued to grow until the onset of the global COVID epidemic when international travel was dramatically shut down. Subsequently, delayed regulations governing the dramatic Brexit result in Britain (2016) were eventually put into effect which drastically reduced access to work opportunities for European passport holders in the post-COVID world. The constraints apply, especially, to new and aspiring Timorese labour migrants seeking to access work opportunities in Britain.

Formal Labour Migration

A second and more formally constituted wave of labour migration grew out of Timor-Leste government bilateral agreements for labour exchange with South Korea and Australia. Managed under the auspices of the Secretary of State for Vocational Training and Employment (SEFOPE), the programmes were designed to provide Timorese youth with work opportunities for skill-based learning and take on the pressure of unemployment at home. The temporary workers’ programme to send Timorese to Korea was piloted from 2006 and formally initiated in October 2009 (Wigglesworth and Fonseca 2016). Under the Korean permit system, male and female recruits to the programme worked in agriculture, industry, and especially the fisheries sector for 3–5 years. The programme included a compulsory savings component which required participants to grow their savings during their absence. By 2023, some 5,500 young Timorese workers had participated in the programme (Tatoli 2023).

The Seasonal Workers Programme (SWP) from 2011 to 2012 was an Australian Government initiative promoted to meet seasonal labour shortages by recruiting workers from Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste (Thu and da Silva 2013). The programme targeted a range of approved industries including agriculture,

aquaculture, cotton, and sugar cane industries. From the inception of the SWP, the SEFOPE has facilitated a growing number of young male and female applicants to work in Australia, and the numbers have grown significantly since then given the proximity of Australia as a work destination and the capacity to return for subsequent periods of work with approved employers. As of 2022, Timor-Leste had enabled over 5,290 young Timorese to participate in the programme (Sousa 2022).

In 2022, a revised and expanded programme known as the *Pacific Australia Labour Migration Scheme* (PALM) was introduced providing employment opportunities of between 9 months and 4 years for low-skilled and semi-skilled workers. This has given greater impetus to increase the numbers of participating Timorese workers with a record 4,852 participants travelling to Australia in 2023, 30% of whom were young Timorese women, working in a wide range of accredited Australian businesses. The PALM scheme incorporates a range of policy objectives and compliance measures designed to strengthen business practices and support skills development for staff (see <https://www.palmscheme.gov.au/faq>) (see also Rose 2022b). Timorese workers are now engaged in many diverse businesses across Australia. Examples include seasonal fruit and berry production in Tasmania, Queensland, and NSW; egg production, forestry, and hospitality services in Western Australia; fisheries and aquaculture in the Northern Territory and South Australia, as well as seasonal agriculture and abattoir work in Victoria.

More recently in 2024, the East Timor Development Agency (ETDA) has initiated a new formal programme with Portuguese Fruit and Vegetable companies that holds out the real prospect of many young Timorese travelling to rural Portugal for work opportunities. Under the programme, the workers live and travel together and are provided with training by the companies involved. They are then offered employment contracts on a range of farms and production centres in the country earning substantial euro-based incomes.

These new and expanding overseas labour opportunities are proving a boon to many young, underemployed Timorese workers who are now earning and saving far more money than is possible in the contemporary Timor-Leste economy. Their efforts, however, come at the cost of separation from friends and family over long periods of time, and they often find themselves living in isolated geographic locations pursuing contract work and often with limited or no access to healthcare and other services. While the immediacy and benefits of the internet and social media help to offset these sentiments to some extent, for many there is a shared sense that overseas work is a form of personal sacrifice for the wellbeing and future of their families.

Growing Remittances

As the scope and scale of both informal and formal transnational labour migration has grown, so too has the weight of savings and remittances directed back to Timorese-based households by dutiful sons and daughters, husbands, and wives. Early remittance practices using Western Union money transfers have also improved and expanded as bank-based services into Timor-Leste have grown. A recent survey published by Griffith University (Conceicao, Costa Guterres and Su 2022) examining electronic transfers of remittances into Timor-Leste, provides insights into the remarkable scale of this monetary flow. The research tracked remittances into Timor-Leste over a five-year period from 2017 which highlighted both the growing size of the remittance flows and a breakdown of the source of funds.

The key points highlighted by the authors are that in 2021, the total remittance from overseas countries increased by 39% to a staggering US\$171 million (2022: 7). This was up from US\$123 million in 2020. The cash inflows have been rising by about US\$10 million per year since 2017 which, it is argued, reflects both an increase in the total numbers of labour performed by migrant participants and growing demands for support from Timor-based households. The figures reinforce the analysis that overseas remittances are now the second-largest source of income in Timor-Leste after oil revenues. The authors also note that Timorese coffee exports pale in comparison to these sums. At US\$25 million in 2021, this amounted to just 15% of remittance flows (2022: 7).

In terms of where the remittances are sourced, the researchers note that the greatest cash remitters were based in the United Kingdom and contributed 67% of the total funds. In 2021, the total inward remittances were US\$114 million from the UK, US\$34 million from South Korea, US\$15 million from Australia, and from Ireland just US\$2 million. Since then, however, due to the impact of Brexit work restrictions on European passport holders (McWilliam 2022) and the recent significant expansion of the Australian PALM programme, it is likely that the scale and source of remittance funds into Timor-Leste is now shifting with a gradual decline from the UK and an expansion from within Australia.

These survey results reinforce the attraction of overseas labour opportunities and their tangible financial rewards, but the data only confirms what young Timorese participants have recognised for years. In one of the pioneering surveys of the impact of informal labour migration to the United Kingdom, researcher, Schuaib, concluded that '(h)ouseholds' with members working overseas (were) better off financially by many multiples than households pursuing local employment' (2007: 5). This observation has been reiterated and confirmed over the years since then and undoubtedly provides the underlying motivation for so many

young Timorese to pursue transnational work experience. The fact that so many participants in the UK labour market, and now Australia, pursue a pattern of circular migration with periodic return for home and community visits ‘on holiday’ (McWilliam 2022) reinforces the point but also highlights the continuing paucity of viable alternative economic opportunities in Timor-Leste.

Remittance flows and benefits

The rising tide of cash remittances flowing into Timor-Leste is directed, unsurprisingly in the great majority of cases, to familial households and close family members. This pattern reflects the strong bonds and continuing sense of obligation that migrant workers manifest via their families through these ‘monetised expressions of care’ (McKay 2007).

To provide a sense of the ways that growing remittances are distributed, I draw selectively on the results of several surveys undertaken in different areas of Timor-Leste in recent years. One survey undertaken in Lautem with 70 returnee Fataluku migrants revealed the high priority placed on supporting the short-term consumption needs of their families in Timor-Leste—expressed as *attende necessidade familia* (McWilliam 2022). However, a significant number (30%) mentioned contributions to cultural obligations. These cash gifts are designed to provide vital support for significant household life transitions such as marriages and funerals.

They also extend to obligatory gifts as part of wider familial networks of exchange (T: *umane-fetosawa*) [F: *Ara ho pata::tupurmoko*] (McWilliam 2011). The immediacy of internet connections between Timor-Leste and the world ensures that news of important family events can be conveyed quickly to migrant family members along with expectations that cash contributions would be forthcoming.

Another poignant sense of obligation conferred upon survivors of the struggle for independence has been the practice among Timorese households for investing time, effort, and resources into commemorating those who died in the process (Kent and Feijo 2020). Over time as resources come to hand, graves in honour of the dead have become larger and more elaborate with epitaphs that speak to their sacrifice as ‘heroes of the nation’ (*Herois da Patria*) and Martyrs (*Martires*) for the cause (Kent 2024). These projects of honouring the ancestral dead have also attracted remittance support which enhances the reputation of the family’s commitment and their evident capacity to fulfil these commitments.

In a more recent and larger-scale survey of 417 returned migrant worker households (Saikia et al. 2022) exploring the experiences among returned labour migrants engaging in work programmes in South Korea and Australia, a range of consistent and largely positive findings were also received. The respondents in this

case were selected from across the Timor municipalities highlighting in part the broader catchment for government-sponsored labour migration than participants in the earlier informal UK experience, even as Dili remained the overall favoured residence among the participants.

When asked about the key benefits gained from labour migration, the majority response by workers and their households was to acknowledge the financial benefits gained (78%), highlighting, in particular, income support and the boost to their standard of living. Examples include responses to questions around purchases of household items using remitted funds where 80% acknowledged these expenses; 54% made kitchen improvements, 27% bought a vehicle or motorbike; 23% made improvements to their existing house, and 18% purchased a new TV, mobile phone, or laptop. The responses reveal some of the desirable contemporary, domestic benefits that the added migration income permits.

Another set of questions addressed issues around the direction of savings and remittances to the wider community for cultural ceremonies or events. Over half (58.7%) answered 'often and very often'. The most common occasions in this regard were contributions to engagements (*prenda*) or weddings (*kazamentu*) (40.5%), and funerals (*lia mate*) (39.4%) with more minor gifts for new births (10.4%), and end of mourning (*kore metan*) ceremonies (5.2%).

All these practices highlight the continuing significance of family networks of obligation and gift exchange in which people are embedded across Timorese society and which extend outwards through relational ties. The capacity to contribute to these group expenses enhances the status and standing of households across their familial networks. Even so, for many, the expectations to contribute hard-earned savings are high and often experienced as a burden among younger people. As one young female labour migrant returnee commented, 'when I got back (from working in Australia) my mother died so all my money was spent on the cultural obligations for my mother's funeral.' Another observed that, 'there is always someone with their hand out. If you don't have it [to give] then they say the ancestral spirits will come after you, or a curse will be put upon you' (Saikia et al. 2024). The spirit ecologies of Timorese communities, it would seem, are demanding fields where obligation and benefit are closely intertwined.

For those who remain in the villages, overseas labour brings economic benefits but also significantly heightened care and labour responsibilities. When a young man migrates overseas for work, he very often leaves behind a wife and young child. Over time, he may return for visits, and more children are born. He may then organise for his wife to join him working overseas, leaving grandparents and great grandparents as the primary carers for their children's formative years. The associated impact of these labour related shortages on rural Timorese agricultural livelihoods is not well studied.

Rural, origin house communities draw sustenance and strength from their annual harvest rituals of crops such as wet rice and corn (T: *saur hare, saur batar*). During these rituals, family members from across the country return home to participate and receive the ancestral blessings of health and wellbeing. With a diminishing agricultural base, the significance of these collective annual events may, over time, weaken the collective commitment to the spirit ecologies of the ancestral house.

Conclusions

The transnational chain migration flowing out of Timor-Leste in recent decades to destinations such as the United Kingdom, Portugal, South Korea, and Australia, has been transformative for participants and highly beneficial to increasing numbers of Timor-based households receiving cash remittance flows (see Rose 2022). It is true that long-distance separations from the interactive sociality of community life are strongly felt and often disruptive of home communities. Similarly, the extended physical absence of sons and daughters, husbands, and wives creates an emotional burden as well as constraints on household agricultural labour needs and the physical demands of ritual exchange and commensality. But arguably, these mixed feelings are to a significant degree offset by the generalised commitment to fulfilling social obligations founded and expressed through local custom, along with the communicative immediacy of social media and a thriving flow of remittance payments funding public expressions of group commitment. In the process, new avenues for the expression and maintenance of reciprocal exchanges are being created and elaborated.

The capacity to accumulate sufficient means to successfully negotiate new marriages and attendant costs in obligatory and reciprocal bridewealth payments (T: *barlake*) is one such novel outcome of this process (Wu and McWilliam 2022). Elaborate burials and reburials of fallen family members and heroes of the resistance struggle is another, as is the renewed commitment to rebuilding *uma lulik* ancestral houses. In these and other ways, contemporary Timorese society has become open to the new possibilities and opportunities of the wider world. Many now increasingly look to distant lands as both a highly desirable pathway to prosperity and one that offers the possibility of building sustainable livelihoods in Timor-Leste and supporting home communities in the process.

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