

Two journeys in Indonesian-occupied Timor-Leste, 1991 and 1997

Steven Farram

Following the 1975 Indonesian invasion and occupation of Timor-Leste, foreign travellers were barred entry. Little news was then heard from Timor-Leste until the beginning of 1989, when Indonesia re-opened Timor-Leste to foreign visitors, hoping to show the world that there was no local opposition to their rule. What non-Timorese knew of conditions in Timor-Leste during the remainder of the Indonesian occupation came mainly from the observations of political activists and journalists, who had usually travelled to the country specifically for that purpose. Examples include Robert Domm (1990), Max Stahl (1992) and John Pilger (1994); other stories only came out much later, such as Kirsty Sword Gusmão (2003; concerning journeys made from 1990), David Scott (2005, 312-328; concerning a journey made in 1994) and Jill Jolliffe (2010; also concerning a journey made in 1994). A number of accounts also emerged from the last days of the Indonesian occupation, many related to the referendum that led to independence, such as Jane Nicholls (1999), Tim Fischer (2000) and Irena Cristalis (2002).

Andrew McMillan (1992, 3), in the meantime, claimed to have visited Timor ‘on a whim’, when in Dili in January 1990, he witnessed a pro-independence demonstration that was ruthlessly suppressed by the Indonesian military. That event led him to write the book *Death in Dili*. This account is somewhat different to those outlined above and seems to have few counterparts in the published record (exceptions are some examples of a similar nature that appear in Sword and Walsh 1991). My first visit to Timor-Leste in 1991 was made with no intention of documenting the Indonesian occupation, nor was my second visit in 1997. I witnessed no demonstrations or ruthless military activity. Nor did I interview any key figures of the resistance, but I did meet and talk with many East Timorese and Indonesians. This paper is an account of my experiences and impressions from those two visits.

In September 1991, when I first visited Timor-Leste, the Indonesian occupation had received minimal mainstream reporting in my home country, Australia. I was travelling through Eastern Indonesia with a young Irishman I had met, Conor McManus, when we arrived at the West Timor port of Atapupu with the intention of travelling to Dili. Several buses met our boat and were soon full and headed off. We got onto the very last one, which took us to Maliana, just inside the Timor-Leste border. There we discovered that the last bus going to Dili had already left and there would be no more until the following day. We then decided to hitchhike.

We were in luck and were picked up by a truck going straight to Dili. The truck left the main road and we appeared to be travelling directly through the bush on a rough track; there was no other traffic. We returned to the main road before entering Dili and the driver took us directly to the Hotel Turismo, where he indicated we should get out. I handed the driver two packets of clove cigarettes in appreciation for the lift, which appeared to please him, as he shook our hands heartily and waved as he drove off.

The people at the Turismo were not very friendly and it was too expensive for our budgets, so we went looking for something cheaper. We found a hotel near the university, where I was surprised to see the manager openly drinking Portuguese wine directly from the bottle; it was only early afternoon. It might have been a sign of stress, but I cannot recall that he said very much. We stayed only a short time in Dili before heading to Baucau. Wanting to hitchhike again, we positioned ourselves outside of town to find a lift. Finally, a large truck stopped for us, but it was a bit disconcerting, as the truck belonged to the Indonesian army.

I felt like some sort of traitor to the Timorese people travelling in the back of the army truck, but our fellow travellers were all Timorese, who told me it was normal to be picked up by the army. The truck stopped for us in Baucau at a large hotel and we went to investigate the cost of lodgings. The door was locked and we had to knock to get attention. A man answered, told us they had no rooms and started to close the door again. I protested, saying that usually when a hotel had no vacancies, travellers were advised

of other places they could try. The man then told us of a small hotel nearby and shut the door. The place we had been denied lodgings was the Hotel Flamboyan, now known as the Pousada de Baucau. The Indonesians used the former Portuguese hotel as a torture and detention centre. According to the 1992 *Indonesia Handbook* (Dalton 1992, 727), the hotel was by then a 'former' detention centre and I hope that was true when I stood outside its doors in 1991.

The hotel we went to was run by a friendly older man. We were surprised to see photographs on the lobby walls of his sons wearing uniforms of the armed resistance, FALINTIL (*Forças Armadas da Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste*; Armed Forces for the National Liberation of Timor-Leste). The owner told us that his sons were still in the bush, fighting the Indonesian military. We entered into a deep discussion, which was frequently changed to other matters when people, whom we were later told were *mata-mata*, or spies, entered the hotel or lingered near its entrance, where we were sitting. The owner offered his opinion that the Indonesian state philosophy of *Pancasila*, with its principles of belief in God, national unity, social justice, just and civilised humanity, and government by deliberation and consent (Kingsbury 1998, 42), was a wonderful thing; it was just a pity, he said, that the Indonesians did not practice what they preached.

Conor wanted to meet some members of the resistance and through one of the hotel workers we were introduced to a young man said to be a leader of the local clandestine movement. We met at night on a dark section of road and listened to tales of FALINTIL's activities in the bush and the growing involvement of youth in the resistance movement, including a recent incident where young school students had verbally abused their Indonesian teachers. The man had purchased us some cans of ABC stout, presumably to provide us with a reason for sitting and talking. Conor was keen to help in some way and offered to carry any news or other items out of the country, but was told that there was nothing of that nature required at the moment.

We then considered travelling to Viqueque, but were told there were no hotels, although we could probably stay with the local priest. Instead, we decided to head for Kupang, and then on to Darwin. We tried to hitchhike again and thought we were very clever when a truck stopped for us after only a short wait. There were already a number of people in the back of the truck and we soon learnt that the driver would expect us to pay for our transportation. I later found that this was a common arrangement in parts of Timor where bus services were limited.

We travelled by truck all the way to SoE in West Timor, but before we reached the border, the truck was pulled over by police who asked to see our passports. They were friendly, said it was routine and nothing to worry about, but they checked our passports closely and recorded all our details. In Kupang, the relatively large number of foreign tourists made me realise that I could not recall seeing, and certainly had not spoken to, a single European for the whole time I was in Timor-Leste. I had really seen little of the country during the trip, but it was clear that it was not a happy place. When the shocking images from the Santa Cruz massacre of 12 November 1991 (Stahl 1992; Pinto and Jardine 1997, 188-200) were broadcast around the world, I realised how tragic the situation really was. By then I was back in Darwin, but I had been in Dili less than two months before.

It was several years before I returned to Timor-Leste, but in 1994 I travelled from Kupang to Ambon and back again on the ship *Dobonsolo*, which also stopped at Dili. While we were at that port, I was approached by some young Timorese, whom I greeted in Indonesian. They asked me to speak English, so that curious Indonesians standing nearby could not understand. They talked very briefly, saying that they wished me to tell people back in my own country that the Timorese were suffering under Indonesian rule, but that they were resisting and would never give up. They then left.

Later at Kupang airport, waiting to return to Darwin, I noticed a familiar figure, but could not remember who he was. He also looked at me with a puzzled expression. It was only once we were on the aeroplane that realisation came to us both. He was Andrew McNaughton, who I had known years before from a house he had shared with friends of mine in Sydney. Andrew was not then the famous activist he was to become, which was just as well, because he had just come from Dili and was carrying secretly filmed footage of demonstrations that had occurred there only days before. Andrew had also recorded interviews with massacre survivors and key figures, such as Bishop Carlos Belo (Fernandes 2011, 100;

Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo was named bishop in 1988. Belo's forceful denunciation of human rights abuses in Timor-Leste attracted international attention. Together with resistance spokesman José Ramos-Horta, Belo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996; for more, see Kohen 1999). In later years it must have been very difficult to smuggle out such material because it became the practice for officials at Kupang airport to go through every item in your luggage before boarding, as I experienced many times.

In 1997, I was in West Timor doing preliminary research for my doctoral thesis when I made my second visit to Timor-Leste, arriving in Pante Macassar, Oecusse on 15 November. The bus dropped me off at the hotel Losmen Aneka Jaya, and I later discovered a new hotel right on the beach, but those two places seemed to be the only lodgings available for travellers. Pante Macassar seemed to be a sleepy place with few vehicles on its streets. Many of the houses appeared to be of traditional design and looked comfortable and well maintained. The beach was very clean and a complete contrast to the rubbish-strewn beachfront area of Kupang. There were many big trees and a number of Portuguese-era colonial buildings; I was surprised that some of them retained their original Portuguese signage.

I had been told at my hotel that there was a restaurant nearby, but many restaurants and shops in Pante Macassar did not advertise their presence with signs and I walked right past it. As I wandered around, I surmised that there were few foreign visitors to Pante Macassar, as many people looked at me with surprise; in fact, I did not see another foreigner throughout my short stay. Most people, however, returned my greetings with a friendly smile, and some older men even bowed. I eventually discovered the restaurant and while I was there another diner arrived who told me that he spoke a little English. His name was Leo and he came from Solo in Java, although he grew up in Lampung in Sumatra, and he had been in Pante Macassar for only one week. He then told me that he was a policeman. I wondered then if his arrival in the restaurant while I was there had really been a coincidence.

Leo increased my suspicions by asking me if I was a journalist and had I come to Pante Macassar to meet Bishop Belo, who was by then world-famous. 'How could I come to Oecusse to meet Bishop Belo', I asked, 'isn't he in Dili?' I told Leo I was a tourist and that I planned to visit Lifao, the place where the Portuguese had first landed in Timor. Leo replied that it was very far, and pointing to a motorcycle outside the restaurant, said that it would be easy to get there though using that. Would I like, he asked, to go to Lifao with him? Leo seemed quite friendly and I thought it would be silly to refuse the offer, so I agreed. Then we both stood by the motorcycle and invited each other to get on first. He thought the motorcycle was mine and I thought it was his! After we realised what had happened, Leo said not to worry, as he could borrow another motorcycle.

We then went together to the police station, where I spoke briefly to another policeman, I Dewa Gede from Bali, and then got on the back of the motorcycle that Leo had borrowed. Along the way to Lifao, Leo pointed out to me the *Proyek Rumah Sangat Sederhana* (Very Simple House Project). Those buildings certainly lived up to their name; they were very small, all in a row and very shoddily built. I could not imagine why anyone would want to live there, but the proposed occupants might not have been going there by choice, as resettlement in order to remove people from areas controlled by the resistance or to compel them to undertake certain agricultural activities was a consistent policy throughout the Indonesian occupation (for one study, see Thu 2008).

Many Catholic pilgrims visited Lifao, as it was the place where the Timorese first learnt about the 'true religion'. At the site there was a small monument and I was again surprised to see that the legend on it was written in Portuguese, even though it appeared to be relatively new. I was also surprised to see a sign written in Indonesian stating *Dilarang dansa di atas tugu* (It is forbidden to dance on the monument). I asked the guard at the site about the sign and he explained that previously the local youth used to gather and dance on the monument. When I was there I witnessed no dancing, but I did see local fishermen bring some of their recent catch and hang it on the monument. Perhaps later visitors were greeted with the sign 'It is forbidden to hang fish on the monument'.

The following day, 16 November 1997, I heard that Bishop Belo really was coming to Pante Macassar. Police were all over the town and it was a total contrast to the day before. I was assured that having so many police in town was very unusual. Bishop Belo was coming for a pastoral visit, travelling in an army helicopter, which I saw flying over the town. I decided that it was probably wise to stay away from

the bishop and not attract the attention of the police, so instead I went to visit Fatusuba, an old garrison and prison built on top of a hill behind the town. I was surprised when I reached the top of the hill to find the Balinese policeman I had met the day before and his Rotenese senior, although it made perfect sense for police to be stationed at such a vantage point during the bishop's visit. After a quick look around and a short chat with the policemen, I made my way back down.

Later that day, when I was sitting in a restaurant, a woman arrived who handed another diner a weaving (called *tais* in Tetun) containing the legend *Kenang-Kenangan Timor Timur* (Souvenir of East Timor), for which he gave her a sum of money. Such weavings, I was told, were commonly purchased by Indonesian officials from elsewhere in the archipelago when they had completed their time in the territory.

On my last day in Pante Macassar, I met a local schoolteacher, Karolus Taut, who told me some history of the traditional kingdoms in the region. He also told me that during the Second World War, five Australian paratroopers landed near Maquelab, about twenty kilometres west of Pante Macassar, and were said to have killed over forty Japanese before they were caught. Further to the west again were the remains of an Australian warplane that had been shot down.

The next day I visited the Tono market, held each Tuesday on the banks of the vast River Tono. I had gone past the site when travelling to Pante Macassar from West Timor. A large bridge had been built over the river about two years before allowing for a connection all year round, but when the river was dry, as it was when I visited, most vehicles drove straight across the dry river bed. When I arrived at the market I found that many people had set up camp in the riverbed and it was being used as a general parking lot. The market itself was set up under some huge and obviously ancient trees.

The market was large and busy and people had come from far and wide to be there, some arriving on horseback. I found that many people at the market had no Indonesian, but there was usually somebody nearby willing to interpret if necessary. Locally distilled spirits, known as *sopi* or *tua sabu*, was abundant and openly on sale, with many men taking advantage of this to sit and drink with their friends. This was vastly different to West Timor or anywhere else I had been to in Indonesia, where locally distilled spirits were sold clandestinely, if at all. I was told that it was government policy to not disturb what was considered a local custom. People I later told this to in West Timor were amazed, as the police there regularly arrested people for making or selling alcohol.

One stall was unique, selling photocopied patterns used for making *tais*. I decided to purchase one as a souvenir, but when the seller told me the price, he was immediately challenged by one of his neighbours, who insisted that I be charged the right price. I was then told a new price; half of the original request. That pattern spent several years pinned to the wall of my office. One day, one of the cleaners at my university told me that she was from Timor-Leste and that she wished for one of her relatives to weave a *tais* including that pattern, so I made her a copy. It was pleasing that the souvenir I had bought all those years before was finally put to the use for which it had been made. Unfortunately, the cleaner left our university not long afterwards and I never saw the finished *tais*.

I left Tono market on the afternoon of 18 November, heading for West Timor. I did not visit Timor-Leste again until November 2003, when I travelled with my partner to Dili. By then the country was free, and although it was obvious that much work still needed to be done, there was a far more positive atmosphere than in 1991. Since then, many stories from Indonesian-occupied Timor-Leste have been revealed, including those from specifically Timorese sources, such as Irena Cristalis and Catherine Scott (2005), Jude Conway (2010) and the Report of the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste (CAVR 2005). The accounts recorded in those collections add to earlier ones, such as Michelle Turner (1992) and Rebecca Winters (1999). Such stories have been of growing interest to researchers trying to untangle the complex inter-relations of the past, present and the future in post-conflict societies. How do conditions of the present shape representations of the past? When is the past 'over' and what influence does it have on the prospects for a peaceful future? Many more questions could be asked about the role of memory and narratives, but that discussion is beyond the scope of this paper (for more on those investigating the subject see, for example, University of Brighton 2013 and Kingston University 2013). In the meantime, it can be said of the present paper that it reveals that I witnessed nothing

momentous during my two visits, but hopefully some of what I have described here can still be of use to those researching the history of those times.

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