

**THE PARADOX OF POWERLESSNESS:
TIMOR IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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INTRODUCTION

In this presentation, I will be concerned with the entire island of Timor since, historically, it is difficult to discuss one part of the island without reference to other parts, and indeed without reference to the region in which Timor is located. In this presentation, I will try to place Timor within its regional and historical setting.¹

TIMOR IN GEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The island of Timor is itself an extraordinary geological formation which has been formed — and is still being formed — by the forward thrust of the Australian tectonic plate in the direction of the Asian plate. The movement of these massive plates has created and trapped a set of multi-island ridges of which Timor is the most prominent. The mountains of Timor, given the enormous pressure that is being brought to bear beneath them, are, in the geological future, expected to rise to the heights of the Himalayas.

The dominant soil type on the island is a soft, scaly clay which has been given a Timorese name, *Bobonaro*, taken from a region in the centre of Timor. This *Bobonaro* clay substratum is overlaid with a jumble of limestone and associated marl derived from the greater Australian landmass and a melange of volcanic materials and scattered outcrops of metamorphic rock piled upon by marine deposits and overlaid yet again by a stratum of raised reefs and corals. The geologist William Hamilton, in his masterful survey of the region, has aptly remarked that “Timor is a tectonic chaos”.

Hamilton's evocation of chaos can be taken as a metaphor for the subsequent development of Timor. As we know, patterns can be identified in different forms of chaos. The same is true of Timor but first impressions are those of bewildering complexity.

Timor's climate is dominated by brief but intense monsoonal rain — from December through February or March — followed by a prolonged dry season. Rainwater, trapped in limestone deposits by irregular sheets of clay, often surfaces in a scatter of fresh water springs. Perhaps a third of all settlement names on Timor include the word for water — such as Oe, Wai or We — indicating a source of fresh water.

Timor's clay soils do not support heavy vegetation. They soak up rain and swell in the wet season; dry, crack and fissure in the dry season. Historically, the Timorese population has carried on shifting agriculture on alluvial and limestone terraces or on the mixed, marine-based soils of ridges, slopes and valleys throughout the mountains of the island, or they have developed more intensive agriculture on various alluvial plains, formed by Timor's main rivers, along the coast. Through Timor's history, there has always been a contrast between the population of the coasts and the population of the mountains.

Timor's rough, irregular, chaotic terrain has, however, militated against the build-up of populations in large continuous settlements. As a consequence, the population of Timor has traditionally lived scattered in small settlements throughout the island, or has concentrated, often seasonally, in specific sites to exploit available resources. Local settlements have shifted periodically, and over long periods, to take advantage of ever changing conditions.²

THE PEOPLING OF TIMOR: THE LINGUISTIC EVIDENCE

The mix of peoples on Timor is as complex as any other aspect of the island. Prehistorians consider Timor as one of the gateways for the movement of populations to Australia. Given the time-depth of these migrations, the search is on for the equivalent of "Solo man" in Timor. As yet, however, no human traces of this antiquity have been found in the alluvial riverbeds or caves of Timor.

The first evidence of early agriculture dates back to 3,000 BC (Glover 1971). This evidence is generally interpreted as an indication of the initial arrival of early seafaring Austronesian populations into the region. It is from these, and probably from subsequent migrations of Austronesian-language speakers, that the majority of Timor's present languages derive. This implies a continuous settlement of Austronesian peoples on Timor for at least 5,000 years.

All the languages of Timor that belong to the Austronesian language family are related to one another as a recognizable subgroup and these languages are in turn related to the languages on neighbouring islands such as those of Flores, Solor and the islands of Maluku. Given the length of time of settlement on Timor, the languages of the island have diverged considerably from one another. The three most important of these languages, with the largest number of speakers, are the Dawan or Atoni language, which is the major language of western Timor, Mambai which is found entirely in eastern Timor and Tetun which is spoken on both sides of the island.

What makes Timor particularly interesting from a linguistic perspective is that a significant segment of the island's population speak languages that belong to another distinct and important language phylum: the Trans-New Guinea phylum of languages. Speakers of these languages are found mainly at the eastern end of Timor but also in the very centre of the island. Their languages are closely related to other languages spoken on the islands of Alor, Pantar and on the tiny island of Kisar, all to the north of Timor. In turn, these languages are related to languages in the Birdhead (*Vogelkop*) in Irian Jaya. The Trans-New Guinea phylum itself is the single largest language group found across the entire length of the island of New Guinea. The linguistic evidence would suggest that these Trans-New Guinea language speakers arrived on Timor after the Austronesian speakers. What is clear is that these languages, of very different origins, have borrowed from and influenced one another over a considerable period of time.

Another striking feature of the sociolinguistics of Timor is the remarkable contrast between the east and the west. Almeida lists over thirty different languages in the east compared with only three languages in the west. The Wurm-Hattori *Language Atlas of the Pacific Area* which groups dialects, still identifies at least seventeen distinct languages in the east compared to three languages in the west. This linguistic diversity in the east does not preclude the existence of language groups, consisting of several dialects, spoken by a considerable number of speakers.

There are complex historical reasons for these remarkable differences. In outline, certain patterns are discernible. There is first the expansion of the Atoni population (also referred to as Atoni Pa Meto, Dawan, Vaikenu) which has, in relatively recent times — perhaps the last four or five hundred years — come to dominate most of west Timor. Only the remnant Helong speakers, now confined to the western tip of Timor and the island of Semau, give some indication of

what Timor may have been like half a millennium ago. This expansion of the Atoni was given impetus through early European contacts and the sandalwood trade.³

Prior to the Atoni expansion, one can discern a still earlier expansion of the Tetun people, probably from what the Tetun regard as their centre of origin on the central south coast. This expansion was both northward and along the south coast. Eastern Tetun (or Soibada Tetun) became separated from Tetun Terik (or Tetun Los, “true Tetun”, as speakers of the dialect of Wehale refer to their language) and in the process diverged from it. In the nineteenth century, the Portuguese in Dili adopted a simplified form of market Tetun as the *lingua franca* for the territory which they controlled. Promotion of this form of Tetun was taken up by the Catholic Church toward the end of the nineteenth century, after having earlier relied on Vaikenu or Atoni and on Galoli. This Tetun Dili with its simplified syntax and strong Portuguese influence has become the language of identity and intercommunication in present-day East Timor. There remain, however, to this day more first-language speakers of Tetun in West Timor than in East Timor.

The single largest language group in East Timor is that of the Mambai who occupy the mountains of central east Timor and whose traditional territory once extended to the outskirts of Dili. Although quite distinct, Mambai resembles Atoni more than it does Tetun, and one might speculate that it was the expansion of the coastal Tetun moving northward that split and separated the mountain populations of the Mambai and Atoni. It was the former hegemony of the Tetun, acknowledged even by the majority Atoni, that lent prestige to Tetun as an appropriate *lingua franca*.⁴

To better understand traditional relations among the populations of Timor, it is essential to consider the history of Timor over the past four hundred and fifty years.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TIMOR

The history of Timor is inextricably tied up with one species of tree, white sandalwood (*Santalum album* L.). This tree once grew, almost as a weed, by root propagation throughout the limestone hills and mountains of Timor. Trade in its precious, fragrant wood may date back centuries before the earliest references. By the fourteenth century, both Chinese and Javanese documents refer to Timor. One such Chinese document reports:

The island has no other rare product but sandalwood which is abundant and which is bartered for with silver, iron, cups [of porcelain], hsi-yang ssu pu [a kind of cloth], and coloured taffetas (Rockhill 1915:257-258).

The first European reference to what had become an extensive trade in Timorese sandalwood can be found in *The Book of Duarte Barbosa* written in 1518:

In this island there is abundance of white sanders-wood which “the Moors in India and Persia value greatly, where much of it is used. In Malabar, Narsyngua and Cambaya it is esteemed.” The ships “of Malaca and Jaoa [Jawa]” which come hither for it bring in exchange axes, hatchets, knives, swords, Cambaya and Paleacate cloths, porcelain, coloured beads, tin, quick-silver, lead and other wares, and take in cargoes of the aforesaid sanders-wood, honey, wax, slaves and also a certain amount of silver (Dames 1921, Vol. 2:195-196).

One of the first European vessels to reach Timor was the *Victoria*, a ship of Magellan’s fleet. The *Victoria* put in on the north coast of Timor on 26th of January 1522. In his account of this visit, Antonio Pigafetta explains:

All the sandalwood and wax which is traded by the people of Java and Malacca comes from this place, where we found a junk of Lozzon which had come to trade for sandalwood (1969:141).

The Portuguese were the first Europeans attracted to Timor by this sandalwood trade. It took over fifty years after the Portuguese conquest of Malacca in 1511 to establish a presence in the area. Moreover, the Portuguese chose to establish themselves to the north of Timor, initially, on the island of Solor. It was there, on Solor, that the Dominican preachers gained their first converts.

In 1561-62, the Dominicans built a palisade of lontar palms to protect local Christians but this was burnt down the year after by Muslim raiders, prompting the Dominicans, in 1566, to erect a more permanent stone fortress on Solor. For its first twenty years, the Captain of this fort at Solor was nominated by the Dominican Prior in Malacca. Around this fort there developed a mixed, part-Portuguese population of local Christians, many of whom were themselves involved in the sandalwood trade with Timor.⁵

The Dominican fort on Solor had a chequered history. Plundered in a local uprising in 1598, the fort fell, after a long siege, to the Dutch in 1613. According to Dutch sources, their forces were able to take the fort because over five hundred of its occupants were, at the time, on a sandalwood-trading expedition to Timor.

Instead of sailing for Malacca, the thousand strong population of the fort, later joined by those from Timor, transferred to Larantuka, a harbour on the

eastern end of Flores. From there, this mixed, part-Portuguese population of local islanders resisted all attempts to dislodge them. This population became known as the “Larantuqueiros” or as the Tupassi (“Topasses”, purportedly from the word for hat, “topi”, because the Topasses regarded themselves “Gente de Chapeo”) — or, as was common in all Dutch documents, the “Black Portuguese” (Swarte Portugeezen).⁶

These Topasses, many of whom later transferred to Timor, became the dominant, independent, seafaring, sandalwood-trading power of the region for the next two hundred years. They were a multi-lingual group. Portuguese was their status language which was also used for worship; Malay was their language of trade, and most Topasses spoke, as their mother-tongue, a local language of Flores or Timor. Neither the Dutch nor the Portuguese who were loyal to the Viceroy of Goa were able to exert any substantial control over them.

On Timor, there were times when the interests of the Portuguese Viceroy and those of the leaders of the Black Portuguese coincided. Just as often, however, the Black Portuguese opposed both the Portuguese Viceroy and the Dutch East India Company with whom they also carried on trade. However often the Viceroy’s delegates were rejected, Portuguese friars were always welcomed on Timor and moved freely throughout the island.

While Larantuka remained firmly in Portuguese control, the disputed fort on Solor, known as Fort Henricus to the Dutch, changed hands several times during the first half of the seventeenth century. At one stage, in 1629, the Dutch commander of the fort, Jan de Hornay, deserted to Larantuka where he married a local girl, converted to Catholicism and became known thereafter as João de Hornay. (De Hornay’s desertion allowed the Dominicans to retake the fort at Solor in 1630 and hold it until 1636.)

João de Hornay, through his sons, Antonio and Francisco, gave rise to one of the dynasties that provided the leadership to the Black Portuguese community on Timor. The other dynastic founder was Mateus da Costa, a rival companion in arms of Antonio de Hornay. Mateus had married a princess of Timor (by one account, the daughter of the ruler of Amanuban; by another account, the daughter of the ruler of Ambenu). His son, Domingos, continued the da Costa dynasty on Timor.

These two families fought and feuded, intermarried and succeeded one another, establishing in the process Timorese clans that continue to this day.⁷ In the seventeenth century, a wise Viceroy in Goa sent his envoy to Larantuka with identical letters of appointment, one for Antonio de Hornay and the other for

Mateus da Costa, instructing him to appoint as his representative whoever he found was in power. (As it happens, this turned out to be Antonio de Hornay but Mateus did not accept this judgement, claiming that his earlier appointment was still valid.)

Two European settlements were established on Timor in the mid-seventeenth century. In 1641, the native ruler of the domain of Ambenu on the northwest coast of Timor (at what is now referred to as Oekusi) was converted to Catholicism by the Dominican friar Antonio de São Jacinto. Prior to this time, the Topasses had traded for sandalwood at several harbours along the coast. Thereafter they made the harbour of Lifao in Oekusi their main trading base, establishing a small settlement there.

In 1642, a Topass captain named Francisco Fernandez, who had been born on Solor, led a band of ninety musketeers across the island of Timor from north to south to strike a blow at the power of the indigenous rulers of the island — the kingdom of Sonba'i in the interior and the kingdom of Wehali on the south coast. Striking at and burning these centres was a demonstration of Topass power and allowed the Topasses to redirect the sandalwood trade through their hands.⁸

From this point, the Topasses steadily extended their influence and control into the main mountainous sandalwood-growing areas of Timor. Their most important stronghold was in the Mutis mountains but their influence extended to the southcoast as well.

The Dutch, in turn, repositioned themselves in 1653, taking control of and enlarging the fortifications begun by friar Jacinto in the Bay of Kupang. There they erected a stone fort to which they gave the name Concordia. This location gave them the advantage of an all-weather harbour with a fortified settlement which could be supplied from Batavia but it put them at a distance from the main sources of sandalwood on Timor which the Topasses and their local allies controlled.

To rectify this disadvantage, the Dutch East India Company called upon its most illustrious general, Arnoldus de Vlaming van Oudshoorn, to deal with the Black Portuguese. In 1656, with troops fresh from triumphs on Ambon, de Vlaming marched into the interior of Timor and was completely routed by the Topasses and their allies led by Antonio de Hornay and Mateus da Costa. For a time, after this serious defeat, the Dutch contemplated withdrawing entirely from Timor. For the next hundred and fifty years, the Dutch remained confined to

Kupang and their influence was limited to a radius of several miles around Concordia.⁹

The Portuguese, who attempted to assert formal rule from Goa, fared no better than the Dutch. The late seventeenth century onward is a catalogue of uprisings against Portuguese authority. Thus, in 1695, Mateus da Costa fomented an uprising in Larantuka to overthrow the first Viceroy-appointed “Governor and Captain-General of the islands of Solor and Timor”, Antonio de Mesquita Pimentel.

In 1701, Antonio Coelho Guerreiro was sent to be Governor. He made Lifao the official Portuguese settlement in 1702 and managed to maintain his position for more than two years until he was also expelled and forced to call on the Dutch for his passage back to Goa in 1705. In 1722, Antonio de Albuquerque Coelho was appointed but was besieged in Lifao for three years by the Topasses and their allies led by Francisco de Hornay. His successor also faced fierce opposition and was besieged for long periods of time while the Topasses continued to control the trade in sandalwood from the interior of Timor.

During this period, the Topasses made three unsuccessful attempts — in 1735, 1745, and 1749 — to drive the Dutch from Kupang. Often the Dutch and Portuguese cooperated in their efforts to control the Black Portuguese. Thus, in 1761, the Opperhoofd in Kupang, Hans Albert von Pluskow, was murdered by Francisco de Hornay and Antonio da Costa in Lifao where he had gone to attempt to negotiate the reinstatement of the Portuguese governor.

Finally, under siege by the Topasses and with his provisions exhausted, Portuguese Governor Antonio José Telles de Menezes, on the night of the 11th of August 1769, abandoned Lifao and sailed eastward, to establish a new Portuguese settlement at Dili, far from any threat of the Topasses. (It was at this point that Francisco de Hornay offered the Dutch East India Company the possession of Lifao, an offer that was officially considered and declined.)

It is appropriate at this juncture to quote an eighteenth century commentator on Timor, the Scots sea captain, Alexander Hamilton, writing in 1727:

[The Timoreans] permitted the Portuguese colony of Macao in China, to build a Fort on it, which they called Leiffew, and the Dutch a factory called Coupang, but would never suffer either to interfere with the Government of their country ... they found that the Timoreans would not lose their liberty for the fear of the loss of blood ... (1930, II:74).

Only in the nineteenth century — in fact only late in the nineteenth century — through a process of relentless intrusions by military force, were the two colonial powers able to exert their influence on the interior of Timor. Despite continuing

contact with Europeans, dating to the early sixteenth century, Timor was never colonized as were other parts of the Indies. For most of the colonial period, control was a matter of pretence and veneer. The Portuguese claim to have pacified their territory by 1912, the Dutch theirs by 1915.

THE VENEER OF CONTROL AND THE PARTITIONING OF TIMOR

In 1777, the Portuguese in Dili regarded Timor as divided into two provinces: a western province called Servião, inhabited by the Vaiquenos (Dawan or Atoni) and consisting of sixteen local kingdoms (reinos) and an eastern province called Bellum (or Bellos), inhabited and dominated by the Belu (or Tetun) and comprising no less than forty-six small kingdoms. Servião covered much of the area controlled by Topasses. According to the Portuguese, this district had as its supreme ruler or emperor, the Lord Sonba'i. At this time, although then situated in Dili, in the east of the island, the Portuguese had less knowledge of conditions there than in the west. Although the ruler of the Belos, whom they refer to as the emperor, exerted wide influence, it is doubtful that this ruler exercised hegemony, as the Portuguese implied, over all forty-six kingdoms of the eastern half of the island.

The Dutch drew a different picture of this same political situation. In 1756, the Dutch East India Company sent a distinguished envoy by the name of Paravicini to order its relations on Timor. This renowned Commissaris returned to Batavia with a contract treaty purporting to have been signed by all of the rulers of Timor in addition to those of the islands of Roti, Savu, Sumba and Solor: forty-eight signatories on a lengthy document with thirty clauses. Whether, in fact, he obtained the signed agreement of all of these rulers, the contract of Paravicini represented the political geography of native rule more accurately than did Portuguese documents for the same period.

The supreme ruler of Belu and sovereign king of Wywiko Behale [Waiwiku Wehali], whose name is given as Hiacijntoe Corea, is reported to have signed the Contract of Paravicini on behalf of twenty-seven dependent domains, all but four of which can be identified and located on a map to this day. Besides domains on the western side of Timor, this contract included at least sixteen dependencies in what is now east Timor.¹⁰ That these Dutch claims to allegiance involved only a nominal relationship is evidenced by the fact that it was only in 1904 that the Dutch were able to obtain an official audience with the person whom they had designated as the "Keser" or Keizer, having had to make their

way to Laran in Wehali with an armed force to meet him. This was the first recorded Dutch meeting with the Tetun ruler of Wehali.

Despite doubts over its validity as a formal political document, the Contract of Paravicini asserted Dutch claims to large areas of the island claimed by the Portuguese. By an equally dubious token, through claims to all the territories controlled by the Topasses, the Portuguese were able to claim large areas of western Timor. These overlapping, hardly credible claims to territory on both sides resulted in one of the longest, most drawn-out negotiations in colonial history.

Discussions between the two colonial powers began in 1846. A treaty of demarcation and exchange of territory was negotiated in 1854 but only ratified in 1859. A further, more detailed agreement was signed in 1893, but the final treaty distinguishing between the two sides of Timor was only concluded in The Hague on the 17th of August 1916.¹¹

There is a particular irony that as negotiations proceeded between The Hague and Lisbon — all phrased in appropriate diplomatic French — neither colonial power controlled the territories over which they were deliberating. At repeated intervals during each dry season, on an almost annual basis, the Dutch led armed expeditions to wage war in the interior, particularly against the expansive and powerful domain of Amanuban. Similarly, the Portuguese mounted no less than sixty armed expeditions between 1847 and 1913 to subdue the Timorese. In 1860, even as he was negotiating with the Dutch over “Portuguese territory on Timor”, the Governor of Dili, Affonso de Castro, described the situation with remarkable candour: “Our empire on this island is nothing but a fiction” (1862:472).

TIMORESE IDEAS OF POLITICAL ORDER

From the earliest Chinese sources to the final reports of the colonial powers, all commentators agree that Timor was comprised of kingdoms and rulers. Traditional kingdoms dating back to at least the fourteenth century imply well-established, indeed fundamental, ideas about order and political relations. Curiously, however, in the long history of European contact with Timor, virtually no commentator has credited the Timorese with a political philosophy or has sought to explore and to treat seriously indigenous ideas of authority.

What is even more remarkable is that the four kingdoms of Timor identified by the first Europeans on the Magellan voyage in 1522 persisted through the entire colonial period despite three hundred years of turmoil,

disruption and upheaval. This, too, would suggest an extraordinary capacity for local continuity: a capacity to persist, to endure, and to maintain links with the land.

The exploration of Timor as a physical location was begun hesitantly by the outside world in the early part of the sixteenth century. Only now, however, as we approach the end of the twentieth century has the intellectual exploration begun of indigenous Timorese political and social ideas. It is some of these indigenous ideas that I would like to consider, briefly, in the concluding section of this presentation.¹²

Three PhD dissertations have been written in the Department of Anthropology in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the Australian National University. One of these theses, *Narrating the Gate and the Path: Place and Precedence in Southwest Timor* (1989) written by Andrew McWilliam deals with political and social ideas of the Atoni Pah Meto or Dawan people. Two other theses focus on the important “centre” of the Tetun people at Wehali: G. Francillon’s *Some Matriarchic Aspects of the Social Structure of the Southern Tetun of Middle Timor* (1967) and G.T. Therik’s *Wehali, The Four Corner Land: The Cosmology and Traditions of a Timorese Ritual Centre* (1995). This most recent thesis on Wehali was written by a Timorese and is based on a remarkable mastery of Tetun ritual language, the “elevated language” (*lia nai’n*) that “enfolds” (*sasaluk*) the poetic narratives of earth origins (*knanuk rai lian*). Here I wish to highlight various indigenous ideas revealed in this thesis.

Wehali is the most important historical ritual centre on Timor. Its supposed “ruler” was given the title of “Keizer” by the Dutch and Imperador by the Portuguese. It was this site that the Solorese *fidalgo*, Francisco Fernandez, burned in 1642 in his raid across the island of Timor.

Wehali is located on a broad alluvial plain on the south coast of central Timor. Situated on a plain (*fehan*), Wehali stands opposed to the mountains (*foho*) where most Tetun live. Wehali is considered *rai feto*, “female land”, as opposed to *rai mane*, “male land”, and is the traditional site of the Maromak Oan, “The Child of the Luminous”, who is also described as the *Nai Bot*, “The Great Lord”, or *Nai Kukun*, “The Dark Lord”. To this Lord, tribute was paid by other Tetun and by many of the Atoni population for performance of the rituals of life.

A major European misapprehension was that this ritual figure held a political function. There are many attributes associated with this “Dark Lord”

who represents the earth. He is “The One who eats reclining, who drinks reclining” (*mahaa toba//mahemu toba*). He is also known as “The Female Lord” and as a representative of the female attributes of the earth, he is — as is everything in Wehali — “feminized”. The idea that all ultimate authority can be defined as female was an equally difficult, if not wholly incomprehensible, Timorese idea for most European administrators.

Wehali is a totally matrilineal area: all land, all property, all houses belong to women and are passed from one generation of women to the next. In contrast, most other Timorese societies (including other Tetun as well) are patrilineal in political orientation (although not necessarily in their total social organization). In Wehali, men are exchanged as husbands in marriage, never women. And in legend as in reality, Wehali is the “husband-giver” to other areas of Timor. Thus, whereas Wehali traces its origins within its sphere exclusively through women, all surrounding realms that look to Wehali as their source trace their relations of origin through males who have come from Wehali. Even the founder of the Sonba’i dynasty among the Atoni peoples is recognized as having come as a lone male from Wehali.

Whereas the Lord of Wehali is known as the Nai Kukun, “The Dark Lord”, the Lord who spoke and acted on behalf of this shrouded, silent presence is referred to as the Nai Roman, the “Visible Lord”. In historical terms, this figure was the Liurai of Wewiku. As “Liu-Rai”, this personage stands visibly “above the earth”, as “male” (*mane*) on the periphery (*molin*) of Wehale. This idiom is capable of continual, recursive extension: the Liurai, in turn, is centre and female in relation to the next sphere of rule which was male and exterior.

From this follows a fundamental principle: that power is divisible, but authority, though it may be delegated, is ultimately one. There was no limit to the number of political powers that could be accommodated on Timor provided they acknowledged the authority of the centre, of the earth, and of the mother who alone could legitimize the peripheral position of the male realms. The bewildering confusion of Timor’s internal political history gives abundant evidence of this principle. It was the task of the male realms to defend their powerless centre and so deny access to other competing forces. This resulted in a concept of inner and outer realms surrounding the centre, with each separate domain replicating the essential male and female division of Wehali.

Another critically important feature of Wehali is that its population recognizes no word for “kingdom” or “domain”. The only term in use is that of *rai* which means “earth” or “land”. Wehali views itself in terms of successive

spheres that extend outward from a “centre” (*laran*) which is metaphorically referred to as trunk (*hun*), sheath (*kakun*) and navel (*husar binan*).

In the first narrative of the earth, the “Only Woman on Earth” gave birth to a daughter whose umbilical cord was intertwined in the roots of a banyan tree. As she grew so did the banyan to become dry land. As “trunk”, she produced both sons (“fruit”: *klaut*) and daughters (“flowers”: *funan*) shaded by an ever growing banyan. In local conceptions, Wehali is thus the first-born centre of the earth, its navel and “trunk land” (*rai hun*).¹³

As a centre, however, Wehali retains no wealth. For this reason, it can not be sacked or plundered for its goods. Its function has been to give. Formerly, both Tetun and Atoni populations directed a tribute in the form of products of the earth; in return, Wehali provided its male vassals of the outer realms with the gift of life. All masculine concerns with “craft and artifice” (*makerek no badaen*) were related to the periphery. To these realms, Wehali also gave the power to rule, retaining only its authority. To the male domains belonged the powers of action and aggression. To Wehali belonged a formidable spiritual authority.

Given these ideas, it is not difficult to see why the early Dominicans and later other Catholic priests were given such open access to Timor, even during periods of great conflict. They came preaching a religion whose ideas resonated intimately with those of the Timorese: a religion that told of a Virgin Mother (*ina Maria//susu Maria*) who gave her only Son (*Oan Mane Kmesak*) to die, to be buried in the earth and rise from the earth resplendent for the salvation of mankind.

To this day, there exists, in Wehali, a *Maromak Oan*, a sacred female lord. This lord, however, is a Catholic as his predecessors have been for generations.

Much of the spiritual authority vested in Wehali (and in other sacred centres on Timor) has now been transferred, through an assimilation of ideas, to Mother Church and to its bishops. In the elevated ritual language of Wehali (which I now quote), in accordance with the “rope of order”, the bishop is now the “Holder of the Great Injunction, Holder of the Great Heat” (*Makaer lulik bot//Makaer manas bot*). His residence is like that of the Nai Bot, “The Great Lord”: “the luminous black house, the luminous red post” (*uma metan maromak//riin mean*). As one who continues the tradition of Wehali, the bishop assumes the role of intercessor for the earth on behalf of “all people of the earth, all subjects of the earth” (*hutun raiklaran//renu raiklaran*). Without resort to weapons, without the possibility of force, in the name of the earth, the bishop

must make his request to “the father whose name cannot be pronounced, to the father whose name cannot be called” (*ama naran la kaka//ama naran la temi*) to rain peace upon the earth for “those who are his people, for those who are his subjects” (*nahutun sia//narenu sia*). In doing so, the bishop experiences the paradox of the power of powerlessness that has long defined Timor’s traditions.¹⁴

NOTES

¹ Timor has a complex history on which a great deal of information exists, much of which has yet to be carefully studied. The major bibliography on Timor which includes references to all aspects of the island up to 1980 is by Sherlock (1980).

² A classic geographic study of Timor, focusing almost entirely on the west, is by Ormeling (1955).

³ For a more detailed, ecologically oriented examination of the history of Timor and consequences of European involvement, including the introduction of maize and of firearms, on patterns of Timorese livelihood, see Fox (1988).

⁴ A useful paper on the formation of the Tetun language as a *lingua franca* in east Timor and on the linguistic situation is Thomaz (1981).

⁵ For an interesting account of the history of this fort, see Barnes (1987).

⁶ C.R. Boxer has written a great deal about the activities of these Topasses. His brief study, *The Topasses of Timor* (1947), which relies on both Dutch and Portuguese sources, is a classic study of its kind.

⁷ The da Costa family established itself in the Noimuti region; the de Hornay family in Anas.

⁸ For a further discussion of this event and its consequences, see Fox (1982).

⁹ For a discussion of the early history of the Kupang area, see Fox (1977); for a more popular account of the history of Kupang itself, see Fox (1981).

¹⁰ The text of this contract can be found in Stapel (1955:87-107).

¹¹ These long, drawn-out negotiations leading to the final border treaty are discussed in detail in Heyman (1895) and Ezerman (1917).

¹² To understand indigenous Timorese ideas, it is essential to read some of the important, pathbreaking ethnographies that have been written about the different cultures of the island. I have listed these studies in the bibliography to this paper. A good starting point would be *The Flow of Life* (Fox, ed. 1980) which contains papers by ethnographers who lived for considerable periods on Timor: B. Renard-Clamagirand, S. Forman, G. Francillon, C. Friedberg, H.G. Schulte-Nordholt and E. Traube. In addition to unpublished theses by Ataupah (1992), Cunningham (1962), Francillon (1967), McWilliam (1989) and Therik (1995), there are major published studies by Berthe (1972), Friedberg (1978), Hicks (1976), Renard-Clamagirand (1982), Schulte Nordholt (1971) and Traube (1986).

¹³ The use of a botanic idiom for describing relations and development is fundamental throughout Timor. For a further discussion of this idiom among the people of Wehali, see Therik (1995:73-76).

¹⁴ I quote here from the ritual text by Piet Tahu Nahak addressed to the Bishop of Atambua on his visit to Wehali (see Therik 1995:264-269).

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