

THE SEARCH FOR PRE-COLONIAL HISTORY OF TIMOR:
USING METHODS AND TECHNIQUES OF ORAL TESTIMONY,
INTERVIEWING AND RECORDING

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Introduction

Following on from my earlier research into the history of the Makassar and Sama Baju voyages to Australia, I felt that research in the islands of Flores and Timor might provide me with evidence of an earlier contact with Australia than was previously thought. For the past three years I have been travelling East and West Timor, interviewing tribal elders, in remote and difficult to accessed places. Nevertheless, the search is not only proving fruitful in the discovery of the history of the Makassar voyages to Timor but of Makassar cultural influence generally.

A surprising bonus came as a result of placing the Makassar history within the context of pre-colonial history of Timor. From establishing a framework of the history it has become possible to create a picture of the tribal structures, governments and administrations together with their relationships one to another, of the whole island before the advent of the Dutch and the Portuguese.

A study of the few printed works on the history of Timor, whether from the Dutch, Portuguese even Indonesian

sources, has failed to reveal much about the pre-colonial political scene. This is not really surprising when it is considered that tribal history is not common property but is protected very jealously and closely by the tribal elders. Why then should the tribal elders be disposed to inform their colonist masters of their tribal secrets, so closely guarded by ritual and ceremony! On one of my attempts at interviewing the elders of a major tribe I was informed that « there are many doors that have to be opened » before I could gain the knowledge that I sought.

The Scene

Timor island at the present time is divided approximately in two; the same border agreed upon after protected negotiations between the Dutch and Portuguese in 1951. There are some 15 languages and dialects throughout the island which compounds difficulty of research. In addition there are some 25 major kingdoms and many minor kingdoms.

Until the arrival of the Dutch and Portuguese there was no concept of time, as the West knows it other than the seasons

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of planting and reaping and anniversaries of tribal event. In recounting events of former years, the tribal elders will explain that a particular event took place in the time of such-and-such a person. That person is recalled in the recitation of the family trees of the *bangsawan* of royal family members, such as the *Raja* [ruler], *Tua Adat* [chief of custom] and the *Meo* [leader of warriors] and their descendants.

It is generally accepted that a generation can be calculated at between 25 and 30 years. This makes it difficult to date an event with any precision unless there is an external description of the same event, such as in the rare comment in Portuguese or Dutch works or occasionally in Makassar manuscripts. Even so, in comparing the written evidence relating to a particular event such as a war between the colonial invaders and the Timorese, the traditional in herited stories are, not unnaturally, at variance.

The communities are still governed by *adat*. *Adat* is the traditional law, customs and manners of their ancestors, which is still stougly adhered to in the *kampung*s or villages, but somewhat watered down by those who have been influenced by city living.

Research

To establish contact with tribal elders is not an easy matter and requires a lot of enquiry and patience. I have been fortunate that, through my work with the University of Nusa Cendana in Kupang and of East Timor in Dilli, I have been able to meet with people from many ethnic groups and kingdoms; who in tum have suggested certain tribal elders to contact. In some cases they have helped me with introductions.

There is nowhere in Timor where precise information relating to all of the tribes of Timor exists and certainly on official centre of administration has the knowledge of tribal elders are. Only an inner circle of family and close residents of *kampung*s know who the *bangsawan* are. Those of the same tribal group who live in city rarely know who the leaders are.

My method in contacting and interviewing the *bangsawan* has been refined over the years by experience and now it has become my practice to work within *adat* of the local people to be interviewed. I first make contact with a person who knows the culture and *adat* of the people to be interviewed and ask that person, invariably a man, to locate the *Raja*, *Tua Adat* or *Meo* and to discuss with them the possibility of my meeting with them to talk about the pre-colonial history of the tribe. My *utusan* or representative will then approach the tribal elders who consider the matter. It may be plannting or harvest time or that some other important event is to take place and my visit is therefore not convenient.

The use of the *utusan* is therefore invaluable because he can then inform me of the refusal without loss of face to either side or of any conditions that may apply if the request is granted. Not to receive a guest is considered to be a slight, if there is no substantial reason. I have been very fortunate that in interviewing four hundred or more informants throughout Timor, only a very few times have I met with a negative response and those have usually been due to prior responsibilities.

In the main, I have interviewed individual elders such as the *Tua Adat*, *Raja*, or *Meo*, who hold stories distinct from each other. Some stories are held in common by the elders and when these stories are retold all the owners must be

present. Many westerners query the accuracy of oral history in that human memory is fallible and that the printed word is gospel. However, in the case of the tribal story holders it must be realised that not knowing the art of writing and reading until recently, the only form of recording open to the tribal elders was memorise the stories handed down to them from generation to generation.

When challenged they simply reply, we have made an oath not change the stories we have received. If we do, we become sick and die. A simple statement but full of meaning. No person other than the story-holder may repeat the stories. People may, and do, hear the stories are secret only select persons can know them, particularly the *silsilah* or genealogies of the tribal elders.

It is inevitable, when comparing an account of an event from a printed work with an oral version of the same event, especially after a length of time, that differences will arise as to what actually did take place. The following is an example of what my researches have shown. In 1641, the Makassar troops under Raja Tallo' attacked Larantuka in eastern Flores, and then invaded Mena in north Timor. The Portuguese, who were defeated by the Makassar at Batugede beforehand, were, with their priests, endeavouring to convert the Timorese to Catholicism.

The King of the most influential kingdom in Timor, Wehali, was endeavouring to expel the Portuguese from Timor and called on the Makassar to help him according to a Portuguese work on the history of Timor reads:

« It was in vain that Raja Tallo' made a plan to encourage the people to rebel against Portugal. Wehali was ready to receive orders from the King and had already received an Islamic hat, which was

given as a present, who used it habitually as a follower of Islam. »¹

« Raja Tallo' still remained in Timor, and not without results. Raja Tallo' had already received his *kopiah* from the Islamic people which was considered to be the same as a promise that he would also become a Muslim ».

« In 1642, a Dominican priest together with 90 soldiers under Major Fernandes left Larantuka for Wehali and, after a short battle, Wehali soldiers retreated. Fernandes chased them to the *kampung* where Raja Wehali lived, and forced the *Raja* to hand over his Islamic hat, and then burned everything in *kampung*. »²

But the oral stories which have been handed down to the present *Raja* of Wehali and his *Tua Adat* present a different account of event and motives.

« At the time of the Portuguese, the Kingdom of Wehali and Kingdom of Makassar joined together to fight the Portuguese. Raja Makassar landed at Kletej, and which took place at the year not precisely known. In the battle against the Portuguese here, Raja Wehali possessed two *Meo*, military commanders, Suri Tuan Wehali and Atok Liurai. And this battle took place at Fau Lulik. And in this battle Wehali was not able to be defeated by the Portuguese and the seat of government was not moved to another place up till now ».

« In this battle, the Portuguese had the opportunity to kill the *Meo* of the Raja Wehali, whose name was Suri Tuan Wehali, whereas Atok Liurai ran back to Wehali and all the Portuguese soldiers still had the opportunity to pursue Atok Liurai, but up to Maubesi Sea. The Portuguese were unable to cross Maubesi Sea, while Atok Liurai was able to escape and all the Portuguese were drowned in the Maubesi Sea. »³

« In Wehali we also have a kopiah, but they call it *robus*, and it was obtained Raja Makassar as a souvenir, not because Raja Wehali wanted to embrace Islam. And this hat is still put away [in the *rumah adat*] as proof of inheritance from Raja Makassar. The Portuguese threatened Wehali, not because Wehali wanted to embrace Catholicism, but because Wehali did not want to be baptised by the Portuguese. »⁴

Those stories may not clarify history but at least they give another side the story.

Sirih Pinang

When permission is given for the recounting of the official stories there is a major ceremony that has to be adhered to. On all major *adat* ceremonies throughout Indonesian the ceremony of *sirih pinang* is carried out as a sign of peace, welcome and friendship. To make a formal visit, as in my case, the visitor prepares a ceremonial box made of plaited grass and places in it a number of *pinang* [areca] nuts, *sirih* [betel] leaves and *kapur* [lime] together with some tobacco or cigarettes. This is taken by the guest and presented to the host who places it on a table in the house or on the veranda of the *rumah adat*. The *adat* house is where ceremonies take place and where historic relics are placed for safe-keeping.

If the offering is received [as in usually the case] then the ritual of sharing begins. Each person cuts a piece of nut and chews it, then adds some leaves and finally a pinch of the lime. The effect is slightly narcotic and results in the spitting of the red juice. I have tried it once. I am usually excused that part of the ritual. Then everyone talks and discusses everything but the subject agreed upon. When everyone is relaxed then the stories begin

or the questioner can start the interview. The stories can go on for an hour or two and in some cases all night. But when the stories are finished, everyone relaxes and partakes of *tuak*.

Where possible I use a tape recorder as this is very valuable in recording every word, especially where the questions and answers are in second or third languages. Where possible I interview in *bahasa Indonesia*, the official language which most islanders know. However, many of the older people are, naturally enough, more articulate in their mother tongue, mainly Tetun or Dawan. If the person interviewed speaks Indonesian, I use that language, but if Dawan, Tetun or some other languages used I ask may *utusan* to translate both the questions and answers, which is a long process.

The only problem with recording is that it catches all the background noises of the *kampung* - babies crying, dogs barking and chickens and pigs doing their thing. Sometimes the old people have the fear of their voice being « taken or captured », particularly by an *orang bule* or white man. Should the family require a copy of the interview I supply it together with copies of the photographs of the informants. Mostly the informants wear tribal dress as a formality. If the informants dislike my using the recorder I write my notes directly into English with the exception of important quotations.

Not all of the stories are told in everyday language. Many of the elders use a « high » language which in Dawan is called *Notoni* and in Tetun by a different name. In fact these high languages are generally known only by the *bangsawan* and the stories are recounted in these languages only at marriages, funerals and other important ceremonies.

In this high language many

synonyms are used which, unless a person is bangsawan, are very difficult to understand and require clarification at a later stage [fortunately in my case the high language stories have been translated into Indonesia at that time]. For example, in Tetun, *cova lima* means literally fibre *sirih pinang* boxes but in actual fact refers to the five houses, the five *suku* which make up the Kingdom of Fatumean [red Rock]. These synonyms are similar to the Jewish pasher used to describe events and places in the new and Old Testaments of the Bible. Original place names are given to other places in a different location, in order to misdirect the uninformed.

Other examples are: *lubu-lubu* Makassar - *pen pena* Makassar, high Dawan language which means: « The *juba* [gowns] and flags of Makassar », and interpreted means: « The Islamic Raja Tallo's robe and his flags ». And *lubu* had, Makassar hat - *lubu oma rua*. Makassar *Uma rua* », which means in high Tetun language: « for cassocks, four Makassars, --two houses, gowns-- two houses, Makassar ». Which interpreted means: « Makassar live there, but united with Wehali. Their connection is not broken ». The use of these synonyms does a very good job in hiding the true meaning, but when I make return visits to the informants they will usually explain the full meanings.

However, it is rarely possible to interrupt a story while it is being recited, otherwise the story-teller gets confused. it is rather like asking a person to recall from memory a particular phrase from some sociology of Shakespeare.

As I mentioned before, the *rumah adat* or *uma lulik* [in Tetun-speaking areas] is a sacred repository for relics from previous events and times. These relics remain in the house all the time except for special ceremonies when they are taken

out. It is then necessary to adhere to set rituals. For example, in one village I visited to interview people. I learned that a very old flag, a relic of the Makassar invasion of Timor in 1641, was deposited in the *rumah adat*. On asking if it was permitted for me to view it, I was told not only had the elders to give permission but it was dependent on a sign from another source.

An *ayam jantan* or red cock was ritually killed by having its throat cut and the blood drained into a small bowl. The blood was then smeared on various inner roof supports and then the chicken was taken outside for all to see. The chicken was then cut down the middle and the intestines exposed. The *Tua Adat* then inspected the intestines were rigid then we could proceed. They were, I was permitted to view the flag to say the photograph of the flag which I was permitted to take failed to reproduce.

This ritual to relics in the sacred house is normal but sometimes other sacrifices are made, such as a pig, goat or even a buffalo, depending on the place and the importance of the ceremony.

Results

From the some of my researches to date there have been two major successes which I expect will have a repercussion throughout Timor in due course.

Although I have not yet finished my researches, a reasonably clear picture is beginning to emerge of the political state of Timor prior to Dutch and Portuguese occupation. It appears that Wehali, the major influence in the island of Timor in the fifteenth, sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, spread throughout Timor from its centre of power at Laran on the west side of the present border, by

families travelling throughout the island and intermarrying with the smaller ethnic groups and by trading. To this day Wehali's language, Tetun, is widely spoken throughout the east and in Belu, that is Wehali country in the west. Many of my informants in the eastern part the island claim their ancestors originated from Wehali and still have family contacts there.

As a result of receiving this information I find it difficult to talk of the « integration » of the eastern part of Timor into Indonesia. Re-unification of east and west Timor appears to be the appropriate term. As a result of my contact with many students in Kupang and Dilli, a great interest has been shown by them in their own personal origins and the follow-on-the origins and history of their own tribes.

Following discussions with staff of the State Museum in Kupang and staff of the University of East Timor, two committees have been established with the aim of encouraging students and other interested people to carry out interviews and record their own tribal elders' stories. A number of lectures have been given to some 100 volunteers in both Kupang and

Dilli ready to go the field. Following a request to the Northern Territory Minister for Asian Affairs and Trade for support, funds have now been approved to pay small sums of money to help offset expenses of travel, food and gifts to informants.

The program of research is expected last for at least five years. Then the two committees will meet to consider who shall have the task of analysing and writing the history of the re-united Timor for the first time. I hope this will be done by a Timorese historian. □

NOTES

¹ II Leitaó, *Os Portugueses em Solor Timor de 15a 1702*.

² M. Teixeira, 1958. *Portuguese Missions in Malacca and Singapore 1511*.

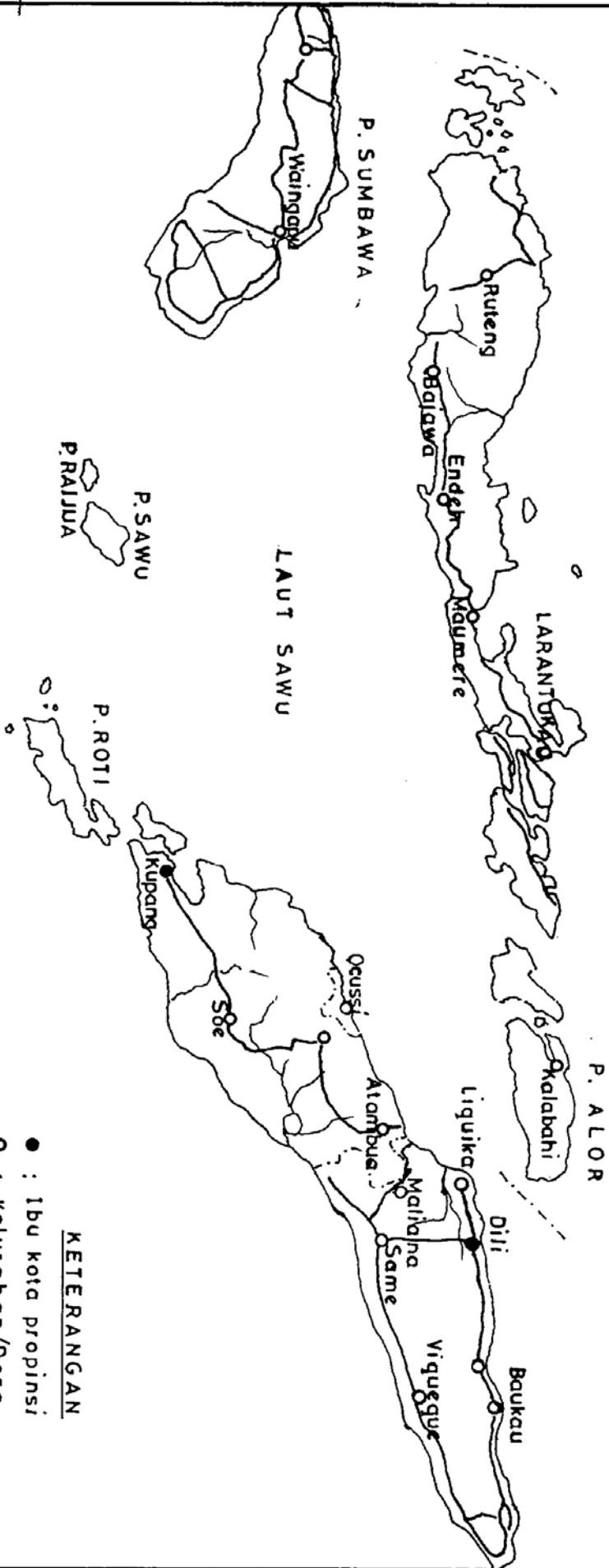
³ Wilhelmus Nahak, Agustinus Klau, Yosef Seran Tahu, Yuliana Nona, personal interview, 15 November 1992.

⁴ Raja Wehali, Personal interview, 5 Februari 1995.

PROVINSI NUSATENGGA RA TIMUR DAN TIMUR TIMUR

SKALA: 1:1.400.000

L A U T F L O R E S



- KETERANGAN**
- : Ibu kota provinsi
 - : Kelurahan/Desa
 - : Jalan raya
 - - - - : Batas provinsi
 - ~ : Sungai

