ESSAY

HOLA WANI: COURTING BEES IN A DIVIDED LAND

Lisa Palmer

'Bees are people,' said Agus, not long after we had arrived in Kupang. This was the first fact I learnt about this animal (*Apis dorsata*) and its relationship to people, a subject I had come thousands of kilometres to Timor to learn more about. It was my second trip to West Timor. Indeed, it was because of Agus that I was back again. The first time we had met, a little over seven years earlier, I had spent time with him, and his oldest brother, Balthasar, travelling from the provincial Indonesian capital of Kupang to visit their extended family along the border dividing East and West Timor, a colonially imposed border that had divided not only the island but also its people. The traditional mountainous kingdom of Lookeu, the royal domain of Agus and Balthasar's ancestors, traversed the border.

At that time, in 2011, Balthasar and I had been researching people's connections with spring water, the ways in which water and springs had, like Balthasar's own family, moved for centuries back and forth across this part of the island. Awaiting my departure to Australia, I was languishing in the tropical heat of one of Kupang airport's outdoor eateries. After a physically and emotionally intense visit I was both pleased with the result of the research and to be returning home to my own family. For some reason, Agus and I began to chat about bees and honey. He passed the time telling intriguing stories of wild-honey harvests, of the associated community ceremonies and his role as a Laku during these events.

Laku, in the Tetun language of the border region, refers to the Asian palm civet cat. However, in the case of the honey harvest Laku referred to a specific group of men who, at certain times of the year, take on the persona of a Laku and climb tens of metres into the forest canopy in pursuit of wild honey and wax. Like Laku, these men only climb in the darkness of the night. Like Laku they call out to one another and to others around as they search out the sweetness hidden in the canopy's branches.

Both brave and sonorous, these Laku climb great heights comfortably to secure honey and wax, accompanied by only firesticks, smoke and song. Once in the canopy they silently receive the inevitable stings on their scantily clad bodies, while imploring the bees to descend and give up their 'houses' (hives) for the benefit of those gathered to sing, dance and consume the honey and bee larvae below. Listening to these stories, I knew that this would not be

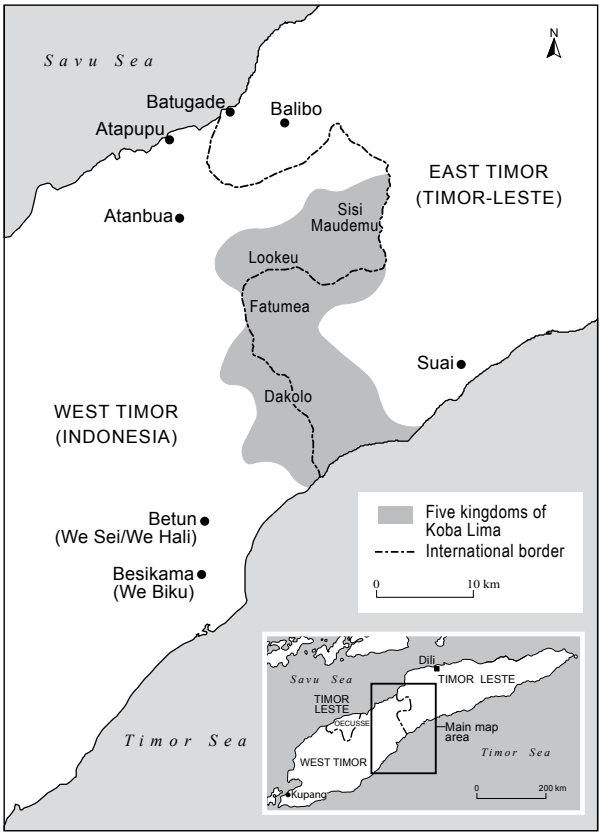
my last visit. In retrospect, I think that Agus was already hooking me in.

So in April 2018 I arrived back in Kupang, this time with my husband and two children. We were met by Agus, who had been meticulously organising the visit, all the while trying to allay his, and my, concerns that the honey harvest was still some way off, if indeed it were to happen at all. *Wani sedauk tama* (the bees have not entered), he told me somewhat anxiously. Just what the bees were yet to enter, I was not yet sure.

Our main concern was the monsoonal rain. It was already mid April, yet along the border area it was still raining. Ironically, in a land often beset by drought and associated famine, the extended and heavy rainy season had affected the blossoming of the eucalyptus trees and brought its own kind of famine this year. *Rai salaen* (the land is hungry), later remarked Hiro, another of the Lookeu brothers.

Unlike Agus, Hiro had never been a Laku. For one thing, he does not have the gregarious disposition that Laku seem to require. The outlandish charisma of the Laku is not the style of this regal and reserved more senior brother. He had once been a foot soldier in the Indonesian army (during which time he fought against another brother, cousins and uncles who were fighting for Falintil, the East Timorese resistance force). Hiro had now settled down in the fertile valleys of his ancestral lands just inside the Indonesian side of the border. Now as well as being a rice farmer, he is also the extended family's cattle herder. From his fields and forest walks with the cattle each day, he can see clearly the mountains inside East Timor where he and his three older brothers were born and where one still lives.

This year, as the season transitioned from wet to dry, Hiro had spent his days herding in the forest watching carefully for the first signs of the giant honey bee's arrival. As he explained to me on that first night in



Map of the location of Lookeu and the five kingdoms of Koba Lima

Kupang, he looks out first for the blossoming of the endemic eucalyptus flowers, then waits to see if some bees also appear in the land. These he says are the 'intel' agents sent ahead by the main bee colony to report on the state of the land and the prospects for this season's bounty. In a good season, by the time the bees arrive the land will be filled with the scent of blossom.

Yet this year the extended rains had interrupted the blossoming process and the *wani* (bees) failed to enter either the land or the trees in their usual number. 'Rai salaen,' he said again. 'The land is hungry.' Another reason for this hunger was that the people in this part of the border were now mainly farming rice and neglecting to plant their more traditional crops such as maize and

pumpkin—plants whose flowers are sought out by bees. At the end of the night, I asked Hiro where the bees would be coming from. 'From somewhere else,' he said, 'from other forested lands across the island.'

As it turned out, some bees did come. By the time we arrived in the border region several weeks later we were told with satisfaction (and relief) that there was a tree with five 'houses' ready to be harvested.

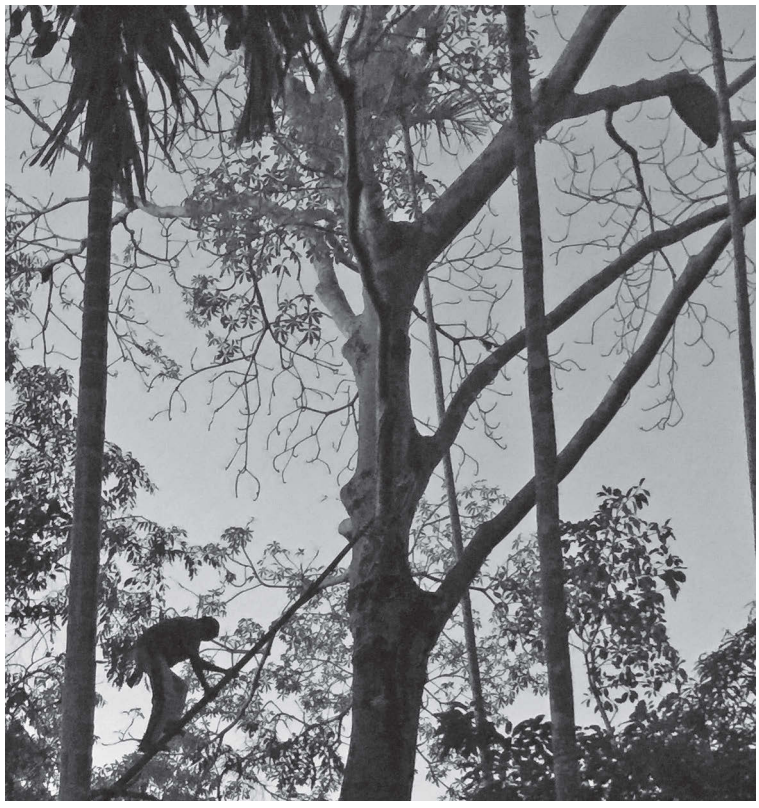
Balthasar had joined us on the border. We were in the mountainous village of Lookeu, within the Kingdom of Lookeu, where Balthasar's paternal grandfather and his people had fled in the early twentieth century after being forced out of Portuguese Timor by the colonial state. Earlier in a war in 1896, the colonisers had destroyed the Lookeu Palace and centre of government in Portuguese Timor.

In the house built in Dutch Timor by Balthasar's parents, we were introduced to the village head, Kanis, a young man educated in Kupang and a nephew of Balthasar. We chatted over coffee and biscuits and betel nut as people started to arrive to greet their 'king' (Balthasar, who lives in Melbourne, had not been home for six years). The house was right next to the Uma Metan Lookeu, the elaborately thatched main house and present-day palace of the Lookeu royal family. From where we were sitting we could just see a ridge that was obscuring what is now the international border between Indonesia and Timor-Leste. Mikail Asuk, one of Lookeu's ritual leaders, explained to me later that night, 'We are from Fatumea [in Timor-Leste]. Two countries, but one ancestor.'

This was an emotional visit to Lookeu, a chance for those present to share histories and rekindle relationships. It was also a chance to retell stories of suffering on the border, especially during the tumultuous years following the Indonesian occupation of East Timor. Then thousands more people fled across the border where they became the meat in the sandwich between the Indonesian and Falintil resistance forces. Two of Balthasar's classmates from Indonesian Timor, suspected by the Indonesian Army of being Falintil spies, were beheaded in the front of the Uma Metan Lookeu. The beheadings were carried out using a sword given to Balthasar's father by an Australian soldier during the Second World War. After the beheadings the villagers were ordered to bury them. These stories were retold, I sensed, for at least two audiences. One was me, a foreigner. Another was my husband Quin, a fellow Timorese from the far east of the island. They wanted him to know that it wasn't only those in East Timor who had suffered.

After our talks and a walk around the village, we returned to the house and began our conversations about the upcoming honey harvest. I was told this would be a small harvest, of a matter of hours in the night, not the usual grand style where one tree might have up to a hundred or more houses and need up to seven Laku and most of the night to harvest. I was introduced to one of Agus's childhood friends, Domi, who owned the tree that would be harvested. He told me the tree was a type of wild almond tree (*Irvingia malayana*), which his grandfather had planted some 50 years earlier. Domi, like Agus, had been a Laku and proceeded to regale us with humorous stories of his and Agus's youthful tree climbing and honey misadventures (most of the laughs were at Agus's expense).

Later, Domi took Balthasar and me aside and quietly told us that 'the bees have names: Buik Lorok and Dahur Lorok'. Female names. Indeed, Buik is also the name of Balthasar's sister. Dahur is the name of one of his female cousins. *Lorok* refers to the sun, as well as to divinity or the enlightened one. Domi repeated what I had heard on my arrival in Kupang, 'The bees are people.' Their queens are Buik Lorok and Dahur Lorok and it is



A Laku preparing the ladder to climb

them, and people's relationship with them, that we would be celebrating at the honey harvest. He explained that the Laku's job is to sing to these queen bees—to serenade them so that they will recognise their connections.

These songs were ritual love songs. Domi explained that they are sung to touch the hearts of these female bees and entreat them to return to their home year after year. He added that if these songs are not sung and the ceremony is not carried out Buik Lorok and Dahur Lorok will not return. As proof he told us that one of the other main honey trees in Lookeu had its 40 hives improperly harvested during the last honey season and as a result no bees had returned to it this year. Harvesting properly means harvesting communally, with song, ceremony and prayer, leaving in place some of the hive for its immediate rehabilitation if the bees so choose. At the end of the season, when the bees have departed, these trees are then 'cleaned' by the tree owners. The old hives are removed, and the branches are smoothed off so that these queen bees and their 'houses' will return, hopefully inviting other 'newcomer' houses to come along as well.

I had been wondering why the ritual was called *hola wani*, literally meaning 'to take the bees'. In Tetun while you can *hola* (buy, take or exchange) something in a shop, you can also talk in the vernacular about 'taking a woman' or 'taking a man'. This means to 'secure' a wife or a husband through the marital exchange of specific cultural goods and communal ceremony. Why, I wondered, did people also 'hola wani' (take bees). Was there some kind of marriage-like exchange happening here between people and bees? After all, I had been told that bees

were people. Now I knew the songs sung were highly poetic love songs, intended primarily for the female bees. The Laku, meanwhile, were clearly the most charismatic, brave and agile of men.

The next day after a few hours' sleep we were out in the forest with Hiro, Domi and the other Laku cutting bamboo for the evening's harvest. First, we cut the wild bamboo, which with its thorny side branches makes a perfect ladder for ascending trees. Next, we cut and segmented another kind of bamboo that would be used to cook the harvest offerings of rice, beans, meat and bee larvae. Then we removed bark panelling from two blossoming eucalyptus trees so as to fashion the trays required to knead and strain the honey. Finally, we cleared the area around the forest stone altar where the food and honey preparation would take place.

As our party rested by the altar in the forest I decided to ask Hiro more about the nature of the relationship between people and bees. Yet as I was formulating the question, out of the forest as if from nowhere emerged the senior ritual leader, Mikhail Asuk. When Balthasar instead asked him the question (on my behalf), he only smiled wryly and replied, 'They descend from one people, but of these things we cannot speak, we must be silent.' I was a little crestfallen. 'Don't worry,' Balthasar reassured me, 'Hiro knows these things and we can ask him later.' In the meantime, Mikhail explained to us his role in the evening's harvest ritual:

> The bees and the honey harvests go back to the time of our ancestors, but I cannot climb like a Laku. When the honey harvest season comes I travel everywhere around here. When the time comes for the bees to arrive in our land, the owners of the bee trees will ask me to come and call the bees. I will also be asked during each harvest to attend so that then I can communicate with them and ask them to come back next year. This skill is gifted to certain of us in Lookeu.

Mikhail added that the bees come each year to Lookeu from named places. From the Turiscai mountains of the Mambai-speaking people in East Timor, and from the lands and mountains of the Dawan-speaking people around the central north-west and central-south of West Timor. 'The bees from Turiscai are small,' he said, 'just like the people who also live in that part of the island.' Finally, just before he rose to take his leave, he added that the bees we would meet tonight were also warriors. 'Our ancestors prayed to them and used them in war,' he said.

As night began to fall people started to arrive through the darkness into the light of the fire lit by the forest altar. The three Laku who would climb this evening had already tied the bamboo ladder to the tree. They had attached it using forest vines to strap it to the top of a small tree from where it was positioned across and strapped to the upper trunk of the much taller honey tree. It looked precarious, but when the first Laku leapt across to try it out he ensured his success by singing out to the bees at the top of his lungs—something that both gave him courage and let all in the vicinity know that the harvest was about to begin.

Back at the forest altar, the bark honeycomb tray and a palm fibre filter had been put in place, positioned so that the honey would flow along it and down through a bamboo half pipe into the waiting honey bucket below. How well the honey flowed would be a key signal of the night's success and the life blessings that would flow through the community from the bees.

Dozens of villagers were now gathered in the forest and they began to prepare the eleven offering baskets and assorted ritual adornments that would be presented to the bees prior to the harvest. This included

the *fatuk metan* (black stone) basket, which must be offered to the queen bees Buik Lorok and Dahur Lorok. One of the senior men wrapped this basket carefully in a black cloth and adorned it with five specially made corn-sheath cigarettes. The smell of these pungent handmade cigarettes would entice the bees down from the tree during the evening's harvest.

Once the black stone basket was prepared, we carried it in procession to the tree, where it was offered at the base, then given more ritual adornments: a red coral bead necklace (*morten*) and a golden breast plate (*belak*). Another two of these same objects were hung from a notch on the trunk of the tree.

One of the Laku was the lead singer of the offering party. As he stood at the base of the tree, he began a resounding love song to the bees. He was soon joined in chorus by the many others who were now holding hands in a circle around the base of the tree. Their linking of hands reflected their bonds to one another and with the bees. The singers circled the tree three times, exhorting:

> Ooooh … ooooh … ooooh … Fatuk Metan (Black Stone) … eeeeh … the wild almond tree where you hang yourselves, where you come to dwell. You came together here as a group to make your home … We bid you a farewell … do come next year. Tonight, we are here with you, our generous and respectful lovers, Dahur Lorok and Buik Lorok. You are giving us your sweetness and the strength of your bodies. We are here to thank you and to bid goodbye to you while hoping and pleading for you to return next year. To return here to your home so we shall be together again for another night. So that we can taste your sweetness and the strength of your beings … Do kindly share your experience in this home to others and bring them along next year too.

As the singing and the circling concluded, the Laku held aloft the black stone basket and circled it in the air in three directions, the directions from which the bees had come and where they would return.

The deep emotion of the singing resonated through the forest and the bodies of all those present. The excitement was building. Next a small black pig tethered to a stake on the ground nearby was carried across to the base of the tree. It was rubbed with betel leaf to give it the blessing of life, before its throat was slit and its blood drained into a bucket below. Domi, the tree owner, moved in the shadows between the pig and tree base, collecting drops of the blood with betel leaf, which he rubbed around the trunk of the tree and over the various ritual offerings. When it was over, the offering baskets and the dead pig were carried back to the forest altar.

The Laku were now ready to climb. Lulled into an unhurried sense of time during the day's slow preparations, we realised that we had quite suddenly reached the climax. We scurried back to the forest altar where we had left our bags, and the children and I put on protective clothing that someone had presciently suggested we purchase the day before in the district capital of Atambua. Everybody else, including Quin, remained in their shorts, sarongs and T-shirts. 'Don't worry,' I was told, 'bee bites are like medicine. They make you stronger.' In the ensuing hours I would come to be so thankful for my recently purchased blue plastic rain jacket, matching pants and camouflage ninja mask.

At first, when the Laku started to climb and began to sing, all was fine. We stood and watched, awestruck but calm from the forest floor. 'Ooooh', sang out the Laku, 'we have prepared the rope to climb … we have tied the bamboo ladder … we are on our way up … you are all hanging up there waiting for us … ooooh … our beloved, enlightened Dahur and Buik Lorok.' The sound

of the Laku's singing was, however, soon punctuated by hissing sounds as their firestick, now alight, brushed against the first of the hives hanging down from the branches above. The sparks from this contact flashed out spectacularly into the darkness, forming wide blooms of red before beginning their descent to the forest floor. This, I had been told, was the cue for the bees to do the same: to follow the light of the sparks, to descend and lie quietly on the forest floor so that their remaining sweetness could be harvested.

Yet on this night, because we were also filming the event, we were using torch light to enable the recording. As a result, the bees were now also flying en masse towards this alternative source of light—and anyone standing near it. What felt and sounded like rain on my plastic jacket was a hail of bees. They came in waves, in unison with the work of the firestick above. By this point, I was filming mostly with my eyes tightly shut, as everyone was yelling out for us to do. I would know when each subsequent wave was arriving by the intense bodily reverberations and smell that would precede them. This olfactory sense would then be quickly augmented by the sharp pain of searing hot needles piercing my gloved, camera-holding hands. Mikhail's words rang through my head, 'These bees were also used by our ancestors as warriors.' This truly felt like a war zone.

But when the camera was not in use and the torches were off, peace returned to the forest floor. We would be serenaded again by the red blooms and the ritual love songs of the Laku. The peace was punctuated by the occasional calls from old men on the ground entreating the Laku to make sure they were making a date for next year with their beloved bees. Alternatively, keen for the harvest to be filmed, these same senior men would periodically call out to admonish the other ground dwellers to stop their banter. Be quiet, we are *shooting*, they would yell. All during their exchanges, a pulley system of buckets was being used to convey the honeycomb from the high branches to the ground, where a small team of men was waiting to collect it and, amid the swarming bees, carry it off to the forest altar.

Most people, including our two children, had now retreated to the forest altar 100 metres or so from the tree. Some sat chatting by the fire, others were helping to cut up the pig and cook the various cuts of meat, along with the rice and beans in specially fashioned bamboo cylinders. One old man had the job of kneading and straining the collected honeycomb, while others stood by to watch how it flowed. These tasks were in full swing by the time we returned to the altar with the Laku and the last of the comb. The people seated by the fire were happy; their reading of the pig's liver was positive and so all was in order. Just as importantly, the kneaded honey was flowing well along the bark, through the fibre strainers, down the bamboo half pipe and into the bucket. These were auspicious signs for the agricultural year ahead.

After the offerings had been prepared and laid out in all 11 offering baskets, we carried them back to the base of the tree. By then all of them, excluding the black stone basket with its betel nut and cigarettes, had been filled with rice, beans, meat and slivers of the harvested honeycomb and bee larvae. The bees were still hovering around the base of the tree, and they swarmed on us again. By this time, as I had been sweating profusely inside the plastic raincoat and hadn't realised we would be heading back into the war zone, I had taken off my protective clothing. 'Don't worry,' the others told me again, explaining that if we held the right attitude and composure the bees wouldn't bite (much) and those that did would be like medicine, they would make us stronger. This time it worked; I didn't even get a sting.

When we had honoured the bees and their spirit custodians by placing the cooked

offerings at the base of the tree, we picked up the baskets and returned to the forest altar. There we all sat and ate together by the firelight before each receiving a piece of the life-blessed betel nut to take home with us. We then collected up the remaining honey, beeswax, and larvae-filled combs and carried them back through the night to Domi's house where the spoils of the harvest would be shared out among all involved.

The day after the ceremony when we were back driving around Atambua I had the chance to ask Edmund, another of Balthasar's brothers, about the white bag of honeycomb he had carried back from the tree late in the harvest. At that time, he had called out to us excitedly and pointed to the contents of the bag. 'This is the *lulik* (potent) one,' he had said, bringing it over so that I could film inside. 'Look at the body of that comb,' he marvelled, before pointing out the morten (coral bead necklace) and the belak (golden breast plate) that were in the same bag.

These were the same ritual objects that had been carried up into the tree by one of the Laku. Edmund explained, as if I already should have known, that this was the process of *fo folin* (giving value), a process used to describe the ritual goods given in a marriage exchange by a male house to the house of a man's bride. Here in the honey harvest it had also been carried up into the tree as an offering to the female houses of the bees (and later brought down again with the very best of the honeycomb). *Hola wani*, I realised then, meant to court bees. What we had just participated in was an age-old Timorese process of courtship, only this time it was of bees, and the ritual took place in a divided land.

The painful pairing of courtship and division in the practice of *hola wani* reveals the consequences of this history. Although these types of honey-harvest ceremonies were once carried out right across the island of Timor, it is only in the most remote and mountainous areas that these practices continue. Wars and displacement since the imposed colonial division in 1859, deforestation, changes in land use and crop composition are rapidly changing the island landscape, and its attractiveness and carrying capacity for bees. Ironically, the suffering and displacement experienced by the Lookeu community along both sides of a remote and once-dangerous mountain border have also kept others out and allowed the survival of relatively intact forests that are essential for their continued relations with wild honey bees. Through the ritual of *hola wani*, they demonstrate both their determination to maintain the bees' movement across the region and to preserve their shared identity.

Note: A 30-minute film documenting this harvest is called *Wild Honey: Caring for Bees in a Divided Land*. It is distributed by Ronin Films. ●

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