Wild Honey: Caring for bees in a divided land

A study guide by Balthasar Kehi and Lisa Palmer with Tamsin Wagner (editor)

Synopsis

For more than a century, the island of Timor has been divided by a colonial border. This border has displaced and separated the people of Lookeu, dividing their land, waters and history. Timor's wild honey bees (*Apis dorsata*) challenge this division, migrating back and forth across it. Their migrations are essential to the agricultural and spiritual wellbeing of the people and places who depend upon them. In community honey-harvest rituals, queen bees, who are the embodiment of the divine, are courted in ceremony by men who take on the guise of *laku* (Asian palm civet cat) and climb high into the canopy to sing nocturnal forest love songs. These songs express gratitude to the bees, enticing and begging them to give up their sweetness and maintain their biannual visits. *Wild Honey* portrays a border community who, despite decreasing agrodiversity and increasing marketisation, are determined to maintain the bees' movement across the region and to preserve their shared identity. This film is the first documented account of a community-based nocturnal honey harvest on island Timor.

Making *Wild Honey*

Wild Honey is an ethnographic film that is filmed in an observational style in which the camera closely follows people, their speech and actions. The film is an outcome of a long-term collaboration between researchers Balthasar Kehi and Lisa Palmer and the people of Balthasar's homeland of Lookeu. The ritual activities are communally orchestrated, and the story is narrated as it happens by members of the Lookeu community. The footage was shot on a camcorder by Lisa Palmer in May 2018 over the course of a single day. The first part of the film, shot in daylight, tracks the preparation activities and pre-harvest rituals in the forest by the *laku* and other community members. As night falls, the camera moves between the *laku* as they ascend into the tree canopy, their movement illuminated by firesticks, and the on-ground rituals, filmed under torchlight with the assistance of harvest participants who worked the torches, at the tree base and forest altar. The filmmakers faced certain challenges: it was difficult capturing footage at night, under low-light conditions, especially when the light of the camera and torches made them a target for the swarm of stinging bees.

The process by which the film was conceived and produced with the Lookeu community mirrors, to some degree, the collective acts of the honey harvest (see Director's Statement). Those involved in the filmmaking intend for it to be viewed in urban and rural locations on Timor, and around the world. Hours of raw footage were edited into a one-hour cut by Lisa Palmer and Frutoso Pinto in Timor-Leste. This enabled an initial viewing by community members in 2018. Lisa then worked on further post-production editing and sound mixing with Seth Keen, Cormac Mills Ritchard, Paul Ritchard and Robbie Rowlands from RMIT University, Melbourne. This resulted in the final 30-minute version of the film. The premiere of *Wild Honey* screened in Timor-Leste at the Dili International Film Festival on 6 October 2019. With each screening and the audience's interactions, the film continues to build shared stories of bees, people, place and relationship-making.

Colonial divisions

The film's location straddles the border of island Timor: the village of Lookeu is just inside Indonesian West Timor while the community's origin village is in the mountains of Fatumean, inside Timor-Leste (see Figure 1). This place is significant in the context of island Timor's colonial history. Australian–Timorese researcher and cultural consultant Balthasar Kehi offers the viewer some historical and political background:

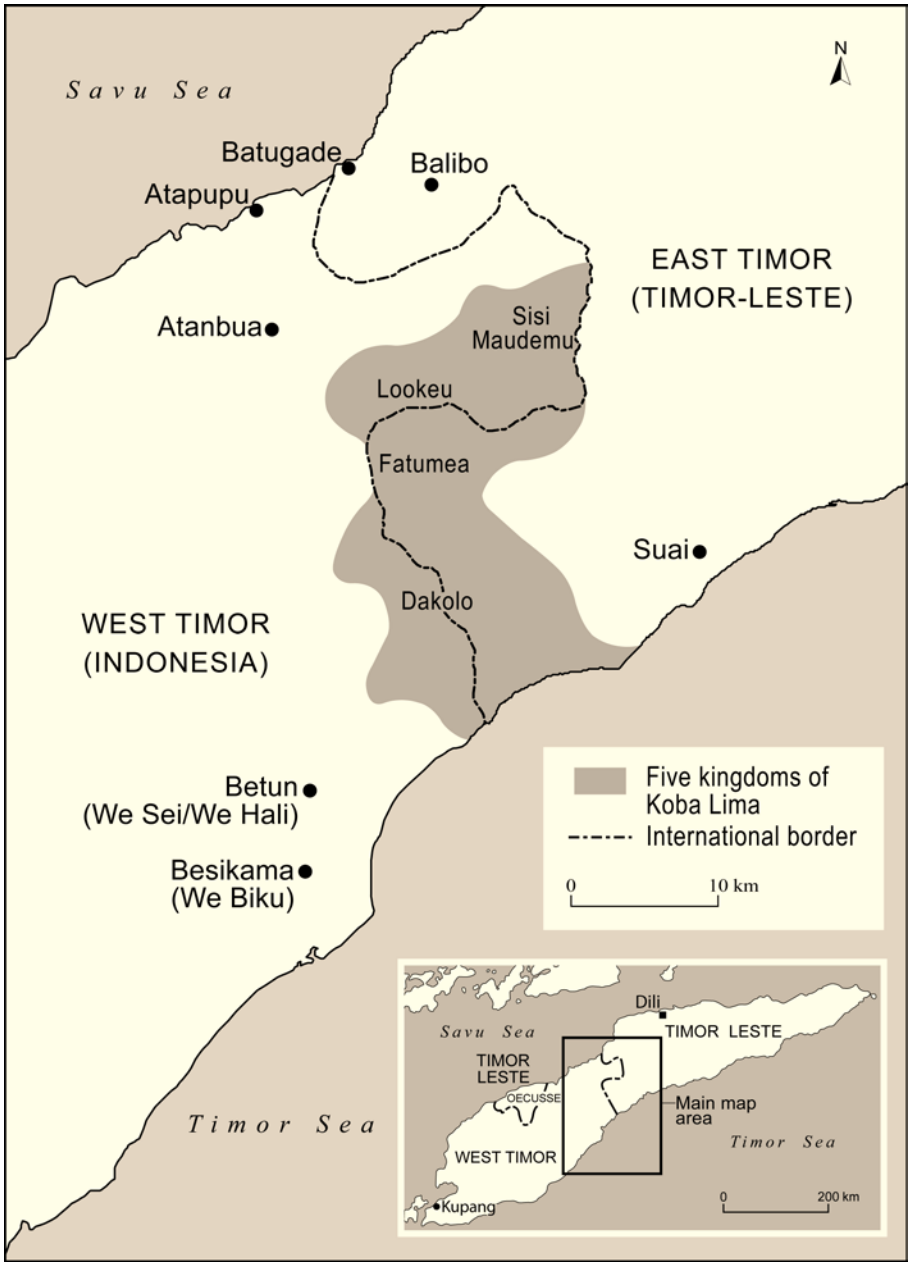

Figure 1: Map of the five kingdoms of Koba Lima, Timor

A battle over Timor between the Dutch and the Portuguese in the 17th century ended with the Dutch claiming victory over most of the west of Timor, including its capital Kupang, and the Portuguese claiming most of the east portion of the island. However, this was not a stable partition. Both colonial powers used a politics of dividing and ruling the local people to pursue their conflict against the other. In 1859, the island was eventually divided into two, and the colonial border settlement was finalised in 1916. All the while, the people whose ancestral lands, springs, rivers,

mountains and traditions were divided against their will continued to resist and to wage wars against both colonising powers.

The 1895 war with the Portuguese along the border of West and East Timor, especially against three rebel and fearless kingdoms collectively called Uma Tolu, was the biggest war and the greatest loss the Portuguese experienced since their arrival in Timor in 1516. Retaliation against the Timorese was led by a Portuguese general, equipped with heavy modern weapons and troops consisting of the Portuguese, Africans (from Mozambique and Angola), Indians (from Goa), Macaoans, and pro-Portuguese Timorese. The three kingdoms were destroyed within three days in September 1895 in an event known by the locals as *rai uma tolu tohar* (the fall of the three kingdoms). But the spirit of the sacred kingdoms of Uma Tolu remains.

During World War II, the Japanese occupied the divided island of Timor for three years before eventually surrendering. During occupation, tens of thousands of Timorese in Portuguese Timor lost their lives. Many villages and towns in both Dutch Timor and Portuguese Timor were destroyed by both the Japanese and the Allies. On 17 August 1945, under President Sukarno, Dutch Timor and the other parts of the archipelago colonised by the Dutch automatically became part of the newly declared Republic of Indonesia. Had the charismatic leader President Sukarno and his government not been later overthrown by General Suharto and his foreign supporters, the fate of Portuguese Timor would likely have followed the fate of Goa, the Portuguese colony in India, which was taken back by India in December 1961 within just 12 hours, almost without bloodshed on either side.

Instead, after the overthrow of President Sukarno, Portuguese Timor was annexed by President Suharto in 1974, and the atrocities committed in the former Portuguese territory during his 24 years of rule were an extension of atrocities committed under his command elsewhere in Indonesia, especially in Java and Bali in 1965–66. Under Indonesian control, the colonial border dividing the island was lifted. Although West Timor and East Timor belonged to two different provinces of Indonesia, a passport was not needed to travel between the provinces and there was a natural movement of the people in their own lands and among their own people. This mobility to some extent brought people back to their ancestors' lived-experience prior to the existence of colonial borders. Then, when East Timor became independent from Indonesia in 2002, the colonial borders were reactivated.

The people of Koba Lima

Symbolically and historically, Koba Lima refers to a sacred geography involving a coalition of five Tetun-speaking mountain kingdoms in the areas along the borders of Timor-Leste and Indonesian West Timor. These kingdoms are Fatumea, Dakolo, Lookeu, Sisi and Mau Demu (see Figure 1). Initially, there was only the kingdom of Fatumea; then a coalition was formed by three brothers, called Uma Tolu (*uma* = house, *tolu* = three) and consisting of Fatumea, Lookeu and Dakolo. Fatumea, Lookeu and Dakolo are fertility-giving sacred houses (*uma mane*) for fertility-taking sacred houses (*feto sawa*) Sisi and Mau Demu. A political coalition of Koba Lima (*koba* = basket, *lima* = five) was formed based on these inter-marriage relationships. When Mikhail Asuk says 'we are all from the same origin', he is invoking the enduring shared connections of the people of the Koba Lima and the bees.

Koba refers to the traditional woven baskets, seen in the film, that are used to present offerings. As such, *koba* play an important role in strengthening respectful and amicable relationships between individuals and between communities, and between the communities and the invisible realm of the divine, spirits of the ancestors, and spirit custodians of water, land, forests and mountains. *Koba* are prepared with offerings for different occasions: betel nut is combined with silver and gold coins during religious ceremonies at the main pillar in sacred houses, at sacred springs or sacred lands; betel nut and lime is offered to welcome guests; silver or gold coins ensure respectful and amicable exchanges during the traditional marriage and other communal ceremonies.

Borders and boundaries

The film asks us to think about boundaries and borders both visible and invisible, and to consider how relationships are negotiated across time and space. Although these types of communal honey harvest ceremonies were once carried out right across island Timor, it is now only in the most remote and mountainous areas such as the border region that the practices hold strong. During the harvest ritual, the migratory bees are called from the east and west, moving freely across the international border. For people, movement across borders is less straightforward. The bees' movement and the ritual observances required to honour their visit gathers together people who have been divided by wars and long-running border disputes. In Lookeu, as people continue their acts of care for bees, the lived reality of division is also at the centre of their story. Balthasar explains:

The colonial imposition of a border was devastating for the people of Koba Lima, and the wound of this forced division remains unhealed. Wars have scattered the people of Koba Lima across East Timor and West Timor and displaced their sacred houses. The sacred house of Lookeu has been moved to five different locations. But while the people of Koba Lima live in different parts of Timor due to war and displacement, they do not forget their origins and from time to time they make

journeys back to their sacred houses or springs and the graves of their ancestors to pray, pay their respect, bring offerings, seek blessings, and renew and refresh their relations with each other, with ancestors and future generations, with nature and with the divine.

The film also offers an insight into the links between political resistance and nature, During the Indonesian occupation, Balthasar's own two younger brothers had to fight on both sides of the border for opposing armies (the East Timorese resistance army, or Falintil, and the Indonesian army) due to circumstances beyond their control. People of Koba Lima tell animated stories of the ways the sacred relationship between people and bees and wasps has sometimes been activated for use in war when they were sent to repel enemies. While in these stories the relationships and bonds between people and certain animals and phenomena (including wind and rain) draw nature into a defensive politics, we can also see in the film how these connections between people and animals can be activated to reinforce relationships and enable peacemaking. The relationships between people and bees transcend the politics of colonial borders, the nation-state and human-centred chauvinism.

Balthasar describes ritual practice as a mode through which people seek union and overcome oppositional dualisms such as light and darkness; male and female; heat and coolness as time unfolds through a simultaneous sense of past, present and future:

The past is not gone forever: the past is in the present and the future, and the future is in the past. People have a thick relationship with their ancestors in the invisible realm (*kukun kalan laran*), with their descendants, with their springs, lands, forest, animals, skies, sun, moon, stars, sea, rivers, lakes, stones, trees, the foods that nourish them, and with the deity which is simultaneously transcendent (*nee leten ba, nee aas ba*) and immanent (*nee kraik mai*). Their actions are put into the perspectives of their ancestors and their coming descendants: *ba bein ba oan sia* (going back to the ancestors and going forward to the descendants), and into their perspectives on the deity as well as their natural environments.

While the film documents a single event, the participants remind us that the well-defined social roles of the wild-honey harvest connect them to a profound tradition: 'These rituals have been given to us by the ancestors. We can't lose them.' As they partake of the wild honey harvest, the *laku* and other participants instantiate their ongoing relationships with their ancestors and with the spirit realm.

The boundaries that divide humans from the higher realm are mediated by people's relationship with bees: the gate through which the bees pass is the passage to communication with the higher realm, and the communal ritual of the harvest makes a space to enable respectful communication, to offer thanks and to ask for blessing and grace (*matak malirin*).

Bees: more-than-human agents

In this part of Timor, bees are respected not just as social insects, but as human beings and as beloved and enlightened beings. Bria Malik Sebastianus tells us that the Buik Lorok and Dahu Lohok 'have transformed themselves into bees but they are actually human'. But they are not an earthly beloved; they come from the realm above. The two queens are female manifestations of the deity beyond the duality of male and female, called Maromak (the Enlightening One) or Nai Lulik Waik, Nai

Manas Waik (the Most Sacred, the Greatest Heat) which is associated with the sun, moon and stars, and fire and is worshipped as the origin source of the upper and lower realms. (Buik is the name of Balthasar's sister; Dahu is a popular female name shared by one of his female cousins. And Lorok refers to the sun, as well as to divinity or 'the Enlightening One'.)

The harvest enlivens many relationships between species, and between human and more-than-human worlds. Balthasar considers that the harvest involves respectful consideration of relationships among *ai wani uman* (the home-tree of the bees) and the surrounding areas around the tree where the bees source food for their combs; the community, as custodians of the tree; the bees themselves; the spirits of the bees; communal ancestors and the spirits of the surrounding lands and waters; the food that is ritually prepared and shared among the participants; the fire used to divert the bees, and the dark moon and stars.

These ideas and interconnections also challenge ideas about human rights which emerged out of a context of increasing individualism and commitment to human exceptionalism. In communal contexts such as the Lookeu customary community, everything — the human and the non-human — is connected and mutually inclusive. Within this context the idea of individual rights to land is also an anathema because it excludes the non-humans and is possessively human. This film offers a subtle glimpse beyond individual human rights by including both the human community and the more than human community. This understanding of rights is often missing from the modern concept and practice of individual human rights, and from ideas of the rights of the human over land and so-called resources.

The role of *laku*

Laku, in the Tetun language of the border region, refers to the Asian palm civet cat. However, in the context of the honey harvest, laku refers to a specific group of men who, at certain times of the year, take on the persona of their namesake and climb tens of metres into the forest canopy in pursuit of wild honey, wax and bee larvae. Like *laku*, these men climb in the darkness of the night. Like *laku*, they call out to each other and to others around as they search out the sweetness hidden within the canopy's branches. Brave and sonorous, the *laku* climb great heights comfortably to secure the harvest accompanied only by firesticks, smoke and poetic song. Any stings are said to make them stronger.

The men designated as *laku* are endowed with specialised skills in tree-climbing and bee husbandry. These skills are a gift. In the past, the *laku* climbed without clothing, and without show of fear despite great heights and the ever-present risk of being stung by the swarming bees. Their fearlessness is secured through the community's respectful relationship with bees and recognition of the inseparability of (human and non-human) community and the environment.

Certain harvest practices are prescribed. For example, harvest occurs only in the darkness of the new moon, for practical and spiritual reasons. While at night-time the bees will be disoriented and less likely to attack the *laku*, the light of the moon and stars is also a significant connecting element between people, bees and the divine. The material qualities of the harvest are also important. All items, from firesticks to cooking vessels, must be made from natural products, although some modern materials such as plastic *koba* have been incorporated. Soap and perfumed scents are prohibited. During each harvest, the *laku* must leave part of the hive for the bees.

The tributes offered by the *laku* to the bees involve both ritual objects such as coral necklaces and breast plates and ritual love songs composed in poetic verse. The latter are sung to soothe and touch the hearts of these female bees and entreat them to return to their home year after year. The role of

laku is to sing to the queen bees — to serenade them in poetic verse so that they will recognise their connections — and to entreat the migratory insects to favour the land with their seasonal return.

Valuing the harvest

The practice and products of the wild-honey harvest are associated with multiple social, spiritual, moral, ecological, educational and economic values. One important characteristic of the honey harvest is that it is a community activity. People's participation in this event provides a rare concrete opportunity to discern forms and realms of responsibility within the customary realm. For example, the mature wild almond tree (*Irvingia malayana*) that is harvested in the film is owned by Domi Moruk and was planted by his grandfather, Bei Tes, about fifty years ago. The custodians of the tree and the land, the *laku,* the ritual bee callers and other specialist knowledge brokers all perform important roles within their domains. Collective participation in the harvest also offers pathways to knowledge and spiritual wellbeing that would not be available to an individual acting alone.

The communal nature of the event demonstrates social and spiritual values of sharing, cooperation and peacemaking, and presents an opportunity for observation and learning by younger members of the community through their direct participation in the event. Balthasar explains the contemporary significance of the wild-honey harvest:

It is upsetting for the elders that the schooled ones are no longer polite in their dealings with others and no longer feel embarrassed in asserting their individualistic *I*, *mine*, the exclusive *we* and *ours*, instead of the inclusive *we* and *ours*. These schooled ones have lost the metaphors and the subtleness of the ritual verses which created the ladders reaching between the above and below. In these local conceptualisations of life, gratitude is embodied in quiet and subtle actions. The schooled ones like to talk, argue and show off their knowledge and *matenek* [which can be loosely translated as 'intellect']. They are like bees who make a lot noise when they are far away from the nectar. Yet when bees find the nectar, they become one with it and remain still. Once you become one with the nectar, noise ceases, silence prevails.

Community members have obligations to respectfully meet with the bees and make tributes to them in exchange for their honey and wax products. If the rituals are not properly and whole-heartedly performed, Buik Lorok and Dahu Lorok will not return. The values of reciprocity and care extend to the spirits of the land, trees, forests and waters. Harvesting properly means harvesting communally, with song, dancing, ceremony and prayer. It means the offering of food that is cooked within green bamboo tubes and served in locally made baskets and on large tree leaves. It means the appropriate sharing of the harvest among all participants without the involvement of money. And it means leaving some of the hive in place for its immediate rehabilitation, if the bees so choose. At the end of the season, when the bees have departed, the honey trees are 'cleaned' by their owners. After leaving some of the wax, the old hives are removed, and the branches are smoothed off so that these queen bees will return with their 'houses' — and, it is hoped, invite newcomers, as well. Through their relationships with the divine, with ancestors, the invisible custodians of land, water, tree, hills, rivers, animals, sun, moon, stars, fire, and with community members and guests, people are managing the forest as an interconnected social-ecological-spiritual system.

We see in the film that the valuable products of harvest — honey, wax and larvae — are shared by all participants, both human and more-than-human. Larvae is an important local protein and treat. If the harvest is sufficiently large, the special role held by the *laku* may grant them additional rights to

a greater share of the honey and wax. Common to many indigenous non-market economies, there is a pre-colonial history of mutual exchange and non-monetary trade. Since colonial times, honey and wax have also been sold as a commodity in a market economy. The harvest is emblematic of the tensions between a commitment to a non-market (traditional/gift) economy to an often interconnected market economy. Participants offer different perspectives on the ways in which money and honey circulate in the local economies. Some *laku* are comfortable saying that they 'do it for money', or 'as a hobby' whereas elders and community leaders, including Bria Malik Sebastianus, Hironimus Asuk and the female elder, Anok Ina Buik, deny an association between the practice and monetary gain, and seek to maintain the non-pecuniary culture of the past in spite of the prevailing temptation and demands of marketisation.

Change and continuity

In the film, some participants comment that more people took part in community rituals like the wild-honey harvest in the past. This was due to the more frequent incidence of bee-hives and greater number of young people in the local population. Previously, a wild-honey harvest may have involved up to several hundred bee-hives, and large sections of the local and nearby communities participated in the harvesting over several nights. Even just a few years ago, in another part of Lookeu that is now part of the Fatumea subdistrict in Timor-Leste, a large, ancient tree was located housing about four hundred bee-hives. When the filmmakers were in Lookeu, West Timor, in 2018, they were told of an aged bee-hive tree that belonged to Bria Malik Sebastianus bearing over twenty bee-hives. However, the tree was in a remote area in the mountain with no vehicle access and so, for the sake of practicality, the smaller bee-hive tree in closer proximity to the village was chosen for filming.

For people to maintain close connections with the sacred realm through ceremony and ritual requires time and resources dedicated to social organising. Development pressures, displacement of

local populations and cultural shifts in religion and education have all contributed to the loss of community ritual. For the Lookeu community, it is important to continue their shared tradition, and to meet with the bees 'so that they remember that we are all from the same one origin'. It is poignant that the suffering and displacement experienced by the Lookeu community along both sides of a remote and once dangerous mountain border has also kept others out and allowed the survival of the relatively intact forests with mature trees which are essential for their continued relations with wild honey bees.

Environmental and social change in island Timor is interlinked. Deforestation, changes in land use and crop composition are rapidly changing the island landscape, and its attractiveness and carrying capacity for bees. The presence of bees is associated with crop success. During harvest preparations, the men discuss the decreased agrodiversity in local holdings: 'In the past everyone would plant cornfields mixed with other crops without chemical fertilisers, insecticide, pesticides and herbicides. Then there was plenty of food for the bees.' But this year, it is observed, 'the land is hungry'. Without the flowering of particular trees and maize crops and other agricultural crops to sustain them, the bees will not return to the land.

Prompts for further discussion

- Thinking about history of the region, reflect on the meanings of 'borders' — socially, spiritually, politically and environmentally.
- Consider the different perspectives of those who do or don't see the harvest as a source of income. Try to situate your observations in historical perspective.
- Reflecting on your close observation of the film, what tensions or synergies can you locate in ideas about 'tradition' and continuing communal practices such as the wild-honey harvest?
- The Lookeu community are seeking the seasonal return of bees to their lands. What are some of the necessary social and/or ecological conditions for the bees to return?
- How does the customary practice of honey harvest contribute to resource allocation and/or forest conservation in the border region?
- The peoples of Koba Lima are described as having a thick relationship with their ancestors (*ba bein ba oan*) and their descendants (*ba oan ba bein*). How do you understand this statement?

- *Wild Honey* documents human-environment relations in a specific geographic context. People care for bees by dedicating offerings, serenading them with love songs and offering their trees as houses. In what ways might the bees be understood to be caring for people?
- What does the film suggest to you about gender relations in this (more-than-human) community?
- How is this film a contribution to documenting customary practice around more-than-human relations? Why does it matter?
- Think about the way in which this film was made. How does it differ to other films? What role can the production and ongoing reception of *Wild Honey* play in strengthening communal connections in contemporary island Timor?

Further Reading: Human–bee relations in other places

Briefly explore and research other practices/ideas/understandings of the human relationship with bees which have been documented through history elsewhere on the island, the region or the world. Select two or three readings listed below, and or do your own library or web-based research.

Selected readings

Damaledo, A 2018 *Divided Loyalties: Displacement, belonging and citizenship among East Timorese in West Timor* Canberra, ANU Press (available as free download)

Fijn, N & Baynes-Rock, M 2018 A Social Ecology of Stingless Bees, *Human Ecology* 46: 207–216

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McWilliam A & Traube E (eds) 2012 *Land and Life in Timor-Leste: Ethnographic Essays*, Canberra: ANU E-Press (available as free download)

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Sager, S 2016 'Enchanting the Honeybees with Magical Love Songs: *Orang Rimba* honey-collecting ritual in Jambi, Sumatra', *Asian Ethnology* 77(2): 377–395 (available as free download)

Tsing, A L 2003 Cultivating the wild: honey-hunting and forest management in southeast Kalimantan In C. Zerner (ed.) *Culture and the question of rights: forests, coasts, and seas in Southeast Asia* London: Duke University Press, pp. 24–55

The filmmakers

Balthasar Kehi lives in Melbourne and returns whenever he can to his homeland of Lookeu in Timor. He has worked in research internationally for various schools and academic institutions and was for many years a Research Fellow at the School of Geography at the University Melbourne. He holds a PhD from Columbia University, New York. His main field of academic interest included philosophy, psychology and education. He is co-author of *Hamatak Halirin*: The cosmological and socio-ecological roles of water in Koba Lima, Timor, *Bidragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 168 (4): 446-471. Dr Kehi may be contacted at bklookeu@gmail.com.

Lisa Palmer teaches and researches on indigenous environmental knowledge and practices at the University of Melbourne. She lives in Melbourne and regularly travels to Timor-Leste to carry out research and visit extended family. Her research is focused on south-east Asia (particularly Timor-Leste) and indigenous Australia. She has published widely and is the author of an ethnography on people's complex relations with water in Timor-Leste titled *Water Politics and Spiritual Ecology: Custom, environmental governance and development* (2015, Routledge, London). *Wild Honey* is her first film. She may be contacted at lrpalmer@unimelb.edu.au.

Credits

The filmmakers acknowledge the custodians of the country and elders past, present and future both in Melbourne where we work and on the island of Timor where this film was made.

Camera, audio and director	Lisa Palmer
Cultural consultants	Balthasar Kehi, Hironimus Asuk Tita, Edmundus Nuak Tita, Agustinus Lau Tita, Nikodemus Sek Tita and Emanuel Ulu
Production assistant	Quintiliano Mok
Translation	Balthasar Kehi, Kiku Moniz, Quintiliano Mok and Lisa Palmer
Creative producer	Seth Keen
Consulting editor	Paul Ritchard
Editors	Frutuoso Pinto and Cormac Mills Ritchard
Sound mix	Robbie Rowlands
Photos	Lisa Palmer and Quintiliano Mok

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