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The Centre of the Land, the Periphery of the Nation : Wars and Migration in Southern Tetun Society, Timor Island<Special Theme : Nationalism in Timor-Leste>

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## The Centre of the Land, the Periphery of the Nation: Wars and Migration in Southern Tetun Society, Timor Island

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ティモール島における戦争と人々の移動からみたインドネシア  
——東ティモール国境周辺社会の宗教と言語に関する一考察——

福 武 慎太郎

This chapter discusses the importance of the kingdom of Wehali for the Timorese, especially for those who lived in the western part of Timor-Leste during past wars. People living in western villages such as Cova Lima, Bobonaro, and Ermera fled to their relatives in Belu, West Timor. For outsiders, this evacuation may appear to be an act of ‘refugees’ fleeing beyond national borders. However, this meant that people fled to the ‘centre’ of the ancient kingdom, particularly because their elders had transferred the luliks, or ancestral objects, there. Luliks are passed down from one generation to the next and can take shape in various objects, such as local antique textiles called tais, ceramics obtained from Chinese merchants, and even crucifixes and bibles given by Catholic missionaries.

Focussing on the movement of people and luliks during past wars, I demonstrate that the centre of the ancient kingdom continues to be important, particularly for people who live in the western part of the new nation state, and that there exists a cultural identity beyond the national border in central Timor.

本稿では、ティモール島中央南部にかつて存在し、ティモール島の「儀礼的中心」と呼ばれてきた国家ウェハリの中心地が、現在もおティモールの人々、とくに東ティモール西部の人々にとって重要な土地であることを示すことを目的とする。過去数度にわたってティモール島でおこった戦争の際、東ティモールの西部地域に暮らす人々は、インドネシア領西ティモールの親族のいる村へ

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キーワード : 戦争, 人の移動, 難民, 宗教, 言語

と避難した。こうした人々の移動は、国境を超えて避難する「難民」の行動として援助関係者からみられてきた。しかし本稿では、ルリックと呼ばれる祖霊を宿す財の移動に着目することによって、戦火から自身が逃れることのみに意味があるのではなく、十字架や聖書といったルリックを、ウェハリの地に運び、守ることに意味があることを示す。その上で、東西ティモール国境をこえて共有される文化的アイデンティティの存在に関して考察を試みる。

1 Introduction	5 Refugee Problem Viewed from Religious and Linguistic Settings
2 Wehali Kingdom and the Spread of Tetun Society	6 Conclusion
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## 1 Introduction

I have conducted in a village outside Suai, Timor-Leste – a small town near the national border with the Republic of Indonesia. Suai is nearly inaccessible from East Timor's capital city, Dili. To travel to Suai from Dili, you must cross steep mountains along a rough road. This process takes a minimum of nine to ten hours from Dili, even in a car with good four-wheel drive. The situation is exacerbated during the rainy season, when the road conditions are even worse. Such geographical and infrastructural features make this area isolated. Today, Suai, its surrounding areas, and the Oecusse municipality are designated as important areas for national development. Suai and its surrounding areas have been highly peripheral sites in the new nation state.

Historically, however, the area was near the centre of the most influential kingdom on Timor Island, Wehali, located in what is today Indonesian territory. Much of the literature has referred to the kingdom as the 'ritual centre' of Timor Island. Many local communities in East Timor have narratives regarding their historical connection with the ancient kingdom. Even now, it seems that this centre of the land is important for many Timorese, particularly those who live in the western part of Timor-Leste, such as those in the municipalities of Covalima, Bobonaro, Ermera, and Liquiçá.

This chapter discusses wars and migrations in central Timor and the history of migration as a demonstration of the historical and cultural connections between the 'west' of Timor-Leste and 'east' of Indonesian West Timor. These suggest the religious and linguistic phases of the island of Timor and gaps in the 'Geo-Body of a Nation' (Winichakul 1994). By examining these, I elucidate the understanding of

the United Nations and NGOs of the issue of refugees and how national reconciliation was far from a reality. Such misunderstandings led to a deterioration in peace and order around the border area from 2000 onwards, and ultimately made it impossible for these organisations to anticipate the turmoil in 2006.

To outsiders, patterns of migration in conflict situations may appear akin to the actions of refugees fleeing beyond national borders. In the context of western Timor-Leste, however, this migration was not conceived of as movement beyond a national border but relocation to the 'centre' of the ancient kingdom, particularly because elders had transferred *lulik*, or ancestral objects, there. *Lulik* is an ambiguous concept meaning 'sacred' or 'taboo'. In a narrower sense, it is linked to the common properties kept in an ancestral house called *Uma Lulik* (*uma* means house in Tetun), which is the centre of the community and the site of families' ancestral rituals. *Lulik* as ancestral objects are passed down from one generation to the next and can take shape in various forms, such as local antique textiles called *tais*, ceramics obtained from Chinese merchants, and even crucifixes or bibles given by Catholic missionaries.

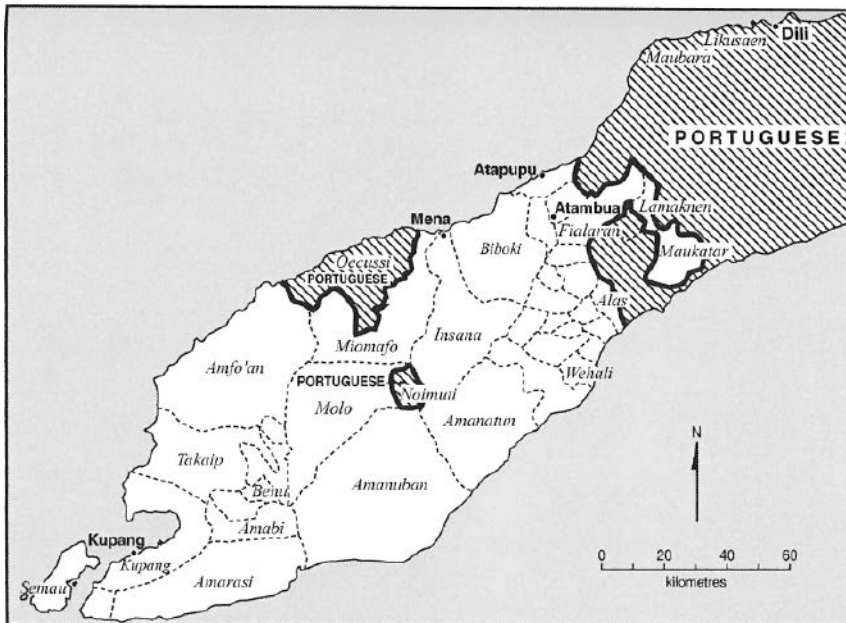
Focussing on the movement of people and ancestral objects during the past wars, I discuss how the 'centre' of the ancient kingdom continues to be important, particularly for people who live in the western part of the new nation state, and that there exists a cultural identity in central Timor beyond the national border.

## 2 Wehali Kingdom and the Spread of Tetun Society

The Wehali kingdom was located in the southern part of Belu Regency in Indonesia. It is believed that Wehali authority had reached both the southern part of Belu Regency and the western part of what is currently Timor-Leste—the Cova Lima, Bobonaro, and Ermera municipalities. In the mid-seventeenth century, the *Topas*, a group of Timor- and Flores-born descendants of the visiting Portuguese, invaded Wehali and weakened the kingdom's political power. However, the kingdom maintained its authority as the ritual centre of Timor even after Portugal and the Netherlands fought for supremacy over the area. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the Portuguese and the Dutch agreed to divide Timor. Wehali was put under the administration of the Dutch East Indies, while other areas were merged into Portuguese Timor (Map 1).

The king of Wehali was called either the *Maromak Oan* (son of God) or the *Nai Boot* (great master) and lived in a sacred location at the centre of Wehali. The *Maromak Oan* is a ritualistic and symbolic entity and is the protector of *lulik*. The chief of each domain, called *liurai*, is responsible for politics and is appointed by the *Maromak Oan*.

Tom Therik, an anthropologist who was born in the area, points out that the hegemony of Wehali in the western part of the island of Timor is verified by an



**Map 1** Western part of the island of Timor around 1914 during the Dutch East Indies era (Fox 2000)

ethnography written by P. Middelkoop (Middelkoop 1963), while Wehali hegemony to the east is verified by records kept by Oliveira (Therik 2004: 53). In total, seventeen domains were under Wehali control: Suai-Kamanasa, Dirma, Lakekun, Fohoterin, Biboki, Insana, Fohoren, Fatumean, Atsabe, Kasa Bauk, Leimean, Diribate, Marobo, Leten-teloe, Boebau, Balibo, and Maubara. Of these, four domains are located in what is currently the Indonesian territory of West Timor. The territory on the West Timor side is not large and is limited to the area corresponding to what is currently Belu Regency. The remaining thirteen domains extend to the municipalities of Cova Lima, Liquiçá, Bobonaro, and Ermera.

### 3 Wars and Migration in Central Timor

Wehali has maintained its authority over the area from central Timor to the western part of what is currently Timor-Leste since the fourteenth century. Although the Portuguese weakened Wehali's political power, its religious authority as the ritual centre of the island of Timor was maintained on both sides of the border, even following the partition of Timor by Portugal and the Netherlands.

When I conducted research in 2000 and 2005 in Betun, the centre of the kingdom, I encountered some hamlets consisting of migrants originally from Timor-Leste. The local people said that they moved during the wars against the

Portuguese and still had connections with family members in Timor-Leste.

Here, I discuss the history of people fleeing to and settling in Wehali from the village of Suai Lolo, where I conducted research from 2003 to 2005. Suai Lolo is a coastal village located about seven kilometres south of the town centre. Although the village is located along the coast, only a small number of people engage in fishing. Instead, most residents engaging in farming, mainly growing rice and maize.

## Return of the Crucifix in 1982

On July 20, 1982, the elders of Kalete village located in Betun invited Father Edmundus Nahak of the Betun Catholic Church, the parish leader of Betun, and government officials of the Belu Regency to discuss the return of the crucifix to Suai Loro village in Cova Lima, East Timor. After several meetings were held from July 1982 to October 1983, in November 1983, the governor of Belu Regency approved the travel of the inhabitants along with the return of the crucifix to Suai Loro village. On November 10 that year, the crucifix was returned from Kalete village to Suai Loro village after nearly 40 years. Celebrating its return of the crucifix, people in Suai welcomed it with the traditional dance by young girls at the entrance of the village.

This episode is extracted from a graduation thesis entitled ‘The Sacred Crucifix of Fau Lulik Talobo by the people of Suai Loro in Cova Lima’, submitted to the Catholic seminary in Flores island by Stefanus Nahak, a seminary student who was born in the village (Nahak 1989) and who mentioned in the thesis that the most important *lulik* was the crucifix. Nahak conducted research on the *lulik* shared by two villages in the east and west and views *lulik* as sacred relics related to Catholicism.

While I was staying in Timor-Leste, I often heard about the importance of ancestral shrines, *uma lulik*, and *lulik* in the country. I was occasionally given permission to go inside and see some *lulik*. Although many of them were crucifixes and bibles, no one explained the *lulik* in terms of their association with Catholic beliefs. Instead, people explained that *lulik* were related to ancestral spirits, and the crucifixes and bibles were only part of them.

While revisiting Betun on the Indonesian side in the summer of 2005, I heard the story about the return of the crucifix and was told that a seminary student had written a thesis about the event. The crucifix was originally stored in an ancestral shrine (*uma lulik*) of the main clan, Fau Lulik, in Suai Loro village. The crucifix had been given to the elder of the clan, Fau Lulik, upon the arrival of a Portuguese missionary named Dakoben, who came to Suai on missionary work in the late nineteenth century.

The first time the crucifix was transferred to Kalete village was the year the largest rebellion against Portuguese colonisation took place. From the end of the

nineteenth century, the colonial government further promoted indirect rule in Timor and expanded its power. Celestino da Silva, who became governor in 1894, divided the Portuguese territory into military districts and dispatched a commander to each. He established this ruling system to govern the people at every level, for example, by introducing a poll tax in 1906. The introduction of the poll tax generated resentment from the local chiefs, *liurai*, and rebellions broke out against the colonial government across Timor, with the largest led by Dom Boaventura, the *liurai* of Manu Fahi district. Because *liurai* from other areas participated in this rebellion, the battlefield spread throughout the country. Dom Boaventura was finally captured by Portuguese forces and sent to Atauro Island, where he died. Records indicate that 3,424 Timorese died in the rebellion (Matsuno 2002: 14).

Following defeat in the Manu Fahi war, Suai, which had never felt threatened by Portugal, was also placed under its colonial rule. According to Suai elders, the King of Suai (*nain*) had influence over the entire plain but lost his political power after the Portuguese suppressed the rebellion. Many people saw the Portuguese warships arrive and consequently fled to the land of Wehali. Reflecting on the Portuguese invasion, the elders spoke about how people fled to Wehali but did not say much about the battles against Portugal. They only mentioned that Portugal captured a *liurai* named Dom Denis, who was sent to an inland area called Aileu, where he died in prison.

The people of Suai started moving to the land of Wehali when Portuguese forces began to invade Suai in 1912 after the Manu Fahi war. After the Cova Lima district, including Suai, was incorporated into the Portuguese colonial administration, the situation began to stabilise, and most people who had taken refuge in Wehali in West Timor returned to Suai. However, upon the Japanese invasion of the island in 1942, the people of Suai again fled to Wehali and many chose to settle there permanently. Japanese forces landed in Timor on February 19, 1942. One of the elders who remember what happened, Joan Nahak, reported that Suai suffered no damage from the attack by Japanese forces thanks to the power of the *lulik*.

The Japanese forces opened fire from the shore, and two cannonballs dropped in the central area of the village but caused no harm thanks to the power of the *lulik*. The first cannonball dropped near the shrine of Fau Lulik but only rolled down. The second dropped on the west side of the soccer ground, but nothing happened. It was as if a coconut fell into the mud. No one died. Not even a single house was destroyed. We rushed to the shrine of Fau Lulik and offered a prayer to *Nai Maromak* and Jesus Christ (Nahak 1989: 56).

The quotation above is an excerpt from Nahak's aforementioned thesis and is generally consistent with the accounts I heard from the elders of the village of Suai Loro. The elders told me that *lulik* refers to accessories, textiles, flags, books, and so on. However, Nahak states that the crucifix was the most important *lulik* kept



inside the shrine of Fau Lulik.

The *lulik* protected their community from the attack by Japanese forces, but after Japanese occupation, the elders were afraid that their *lulik* would be stolen and decided to move them to the land of Wehali. On September 17, 1942, a white wooden box containing *lulik*, including the crucifix, was carried to Wehali by the seven elders, who acted as the protectors of the *lulik* together with their relatives. Edmundus Bria Taeku, the king of Wehali, allowed the elders and their families to stay in Wehali's sacred area called Laran, where they ultimately decided to remain.

The next migration to Wehali took place during the civil war in 1975 and the subsequent Indonesian military invasion that followed the post-coup Portuguese government's decision to withdraw from its colonies. From 1974 to 1975, the FRETILIN political party called for immediate independence and attracted majority support for their cause. Next in popularity was the *União Democrática Timorens* (UDT) party, which called for a moderate federal system to be run in cooperation with Portugal. The political party APODETI, which called for integration into the Republic of Indonesia, was a minority party at this time. In 1975, conflict among the political parties gradually intensified, and many members of APODETI and their supporters fled to the Indonesian territory of West Timor.

Once the conflict ended, Portuguese Timor became 'Timor Timur (East Timor Province)' of the Republic of Indonesia. The people of Suai Loro, who had stayed in the village of Kalete, began discussing the return of the *lulik* to the village of Suai Loro. The elders of the villages of Suai Loro and Kalete shared a common understanding that keeping the *lulik* in the village of Kalete was a temporary measure and that they must be returned to their rightful location. On November 10, 1983, for the first time in 40 years, the *lulik* were returned to the village of Suai Loro.

### **Post-referendum Turmoil (1999)**

Suai was seriously damaged by anti-independence militias in the aftermath of the 1999 East Timor independence referendum. The anti-independence militias *MAHIDI* and *Laksaur*, established from the end of 1998 to 1999, mainly carried out their activities around Suai. *Laksaur* in Suai recruited many young people in the village of Suai Loro. During the turmoil, both Suai's central area and the village of Suai Loro suffered significant damage, with most of its shrines being burned down. The most violent of the incidents perpetrated by the anti-independence militias in Suai was the massacre at Suai Church. On September 6, members of *Laksaur* attacked the church, killing 136 people who had taken refuge there at random, including three of the church's priests.

At that time, many people fled to Indonesian territory. When multinational forces landed on the shore of Suai at the end of September, the anti-independence militias also fled to Indonesian territory. As multinational forces began to gain con-



trol of the situation, the people who had fled gradually returned to Suai. According to statistics provided by UNTAET (the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor), of the 16,000 people who fled from the Suai Administrative Post to Indonesian territory, 13,000 had returned by April 2001. Most returned to their villages of origin by the end of 1999.

When the people of Suai Loro heard about the Suai Church massacre, they immediately began preparing for evacuation. Many people—mainly women, children, and the elderly—sought refuge in the village of Kalete. The *lulik* kept in the shrine were transferred to the village of Kalete for the second time since the Japanese military invasion in 1942. This time, however, they were returned to Suai Loro as soon as the situation stabilised. Although the shrine was burned down, it was rebuilt in 2002 (Photo 1). A lavish ceremony was held and the *lulik* were once again safely enshrined.

Thus, since 1912, the people of Suai repeatedly fled to Wehali each time a war erupted (Table 1). This was not only true for the people of Suai; people also repeatedly fled to and settled in Wehali from the districts of Bobonaro and Ermera, even all the way from the district of Liquiçá. People particularly settled in Wehali in 1942 during the Japanese military invasion, though it is uncertain why they chose to do so, as Japanese forces had already taken control of Betun, the central part of Wehali in the southern region. However, the migration and settlement of these people indicate that they were connected across the east-west border and that the southern part of Belu Regency was the centre of their connection. Transferring the *lulik*, which can also be interpreted as sacred relics, to the land of Wehali was most



**Photo 1** Fau Lulik Shrine (*Uma Lulik Fau Lulik*) in the village of Suai Loro. The *lulik* (the crucifix) returned from West Timor in 1983 is enshrined here. Source: Photograph by Aya Watanabe, 2010.

**Table 1** Migration of the people of Suai to Wehali, their settlement, and the transfer of the *lulik*

	Manu Fahi War(1912)	Japanese invasion(1942)	Return of the <i>lulik</i> (1983)	Post-referendum turmoil (1999)
Move of the <i>lulik</i> (crucifix)	Suai Loro → Kalete → Suai Loro  Most people temporarily fled and returned with the <i>lulik</i>	Suai Loro → Kalete Village  People fled to Wehali with the <i>lulik</i> and settled there	Kalete → Suai Loro  Only the <i>lulik</i> were returned to Suai	Suai Loro → Kalete → Suai Loro  Most people temporarily fled and returned with the <i>lulik</i>

important, even more so than the migration of people.

#### 4 Catholic Missions and Language Settings in Central Timor

Today, most Timorese are Catholics. The Catholic church of Timor-Leste has had a long history since the arrival of the first Portuguese in the sixteenth century. This is one of the reasons the ‘East Timor problem’ has been often misunderstood as a ‘religious antagonism’ between Timor-Leste and Indonesia, which comprises the largest Muslim population in the world.

At the time of the Indonesian invasion, however, Catholics in Portuguese Timor only accounted for 28% of the population. The great majority were non-Christian, holding local beliefs including ancestral worship (Kohen 2001: 43–51). The Catholic population increased dramatically under Indonesian rule because of the religious policy that all Indonesians must be affiliated with either Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, or Buddhism.

After Portugal occupied Malacca, the island of Timor was described on maps as belonging to the Diocese of Malacca, similar to the island of Flores. In the mid-sixteenth century, the Dominican order of Portugal began missionary activities in Flores and established at least twenty forts, mainly along the coast of the island, during the latter half of the sixteenth century. In the seventeenth century, the Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, VOC) established hegemony in eastern Indonesia, replacing Portugal. In 1642, VOC banned Catholic missions on the island of Flores, at which point Dominicans moved to the island of Timor (Aoki 2002: 261).

The Dutch lifted the ban on Catholic missionary activities on the island of Flores in 1808. A Jesuit mission set about their work in Larantuka, a small village located in the east of the island of Flores in 1860, and then extended their mission to the central part of Timor. They taught Christianity to the children of local chiefs in schools, and in 1913 they handed over their work to the Society of the Divine Word (*Societas Verbi Divini*, abbreviated SVD), established in Germany, withdrew

from eastern Indonesia, and concentrated their missionary activities on the island of Jawa (Aoki 2002: 262; Bornemann 1981: 345; Steenbrink 2007: 156–160).

SVD set about missionary activities starting in 1913 in Flores and Timor. In Timor, they were mainly based in Belu Regency, bordering Portuguese Timor. SVD also taught catechism to the children of the local chiefs and the population of indigenous Catholics slowly increased in the area under Dutch colonial rule. During the same period, the Jesuits compiled a Tetun-Dutch dictionary, and SVD conducted ethnographic research and wrote numerous monographs.

It was not until the 1950s that the population of Timorese Catholics dramatically increased in Belu Regency. This was most likely a result of the new religious policy, under which everyone was required to affiliate themselves with one of the major faiths: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, or Buddhism. According to the 1961 statistics, 90% of the local population (380,000 people) became Catholic in the Diocese of Atambua (Smythe 2004: 71).

On the other hand, as previously stated, most Timorese in Portuguese Timor were non-Christian until 1975. The Dominicans began their missionary activities in 1556 and had established 10 missions and 22 churches by 1640. Their activities were restricted to the coastal areas (Gunn 2001: 3–14; Molnar 2010: 18–19). By the mid-eighteenth century, the Dominicans had established two seminaries, one in Manatutu, a town on the northern coast, and the other in Oecusse, an enclave. However, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Dominicans were expelled from Portuguese Timor after their relationship with the colonial government deteriorated. The Jesuits and the Society of Saint Francis de Sales then took over missionary work in Portuguese Timor. In 1899, the Jesuit missionary established a seminary in Soibada, a small village in the south-eastern region, and began providing theological education, mainly to the children of local chiefs. However, it was not long before the Portuguese Republic was established in 1910 and all missionaries were expelled from all Portuguese territories. Thus, there were no Catholic missionary activities in Portuguese Timor until the Diocese of Dili asked the Jesuit mission to return and establish a seminary in Dare, a village close to Dili. There was no increase in the number of Catholics in the period from 1910 to 1958, presumably due to the ban on Catholic missions in Portuguese Timor.

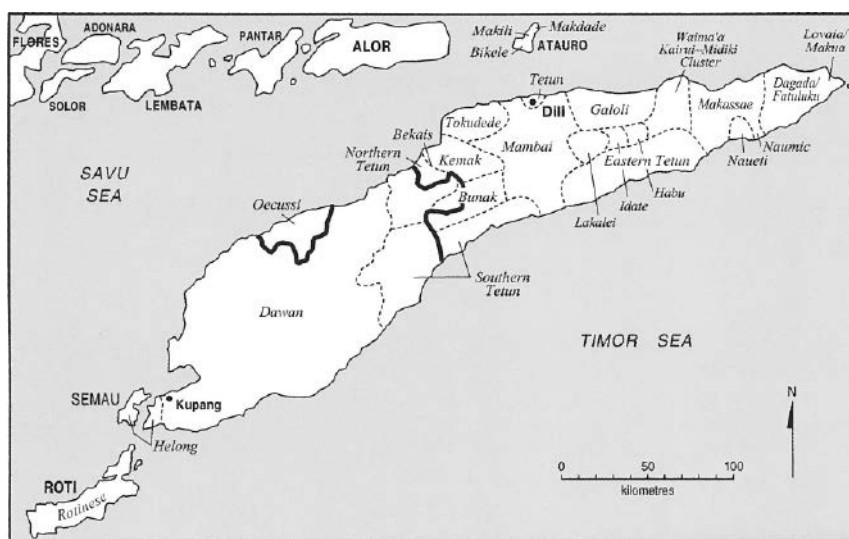
There was a rapid increase in the rate of conversion to Catholicism by Timorese during the Indonesian era. As with Indonesian West Timor, Indonesian rule required all residents to affiliate with one of the religions officially authorised by the state. Most people in Timor-Leste chose Catholicism because it was the most familiar religion.

In Timor-Leste, the Catholic Church's adoption of Tetun as the liturgical language during the Indonesian occupation had a major effect. Following the Second Vatican Council (*Concilium Vaticanum Secundum* 1962–1965), the Vatican decided to allow the use of vernacular languages in mass instead of Latin. As dioceses in

East Timor were directly subject to the Holy See, coming under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Catholic Church in Rome, they were not incorporated into the diocesan hierarchy of the Indonesian Catholic Church, even under Indonesian rule. Consequently, the Catholic Church in East Timor province did not choose Bahasa Indonesia as the vernacular language used in mass. In 1981, the Church decided to adopt Tetun, a creole language spoken in and around Dili.

A clarification of the situation regarding spoken languages on the island of Timor is necessary here. According to Geoffrey Hull, there are 22 languages on the island of Timor, of which 18 are spoken in the eastern region of the island (Map 2). There is no dominant language; people who speak Tetun language as a mother tongue number only 20% of the population in Timor-Leste. Tetun was mainly spoken in Dili, Cova Lima, and the south-eastern coastal region. Linguistically, Tetun belongs to the Austronesian language group. It spread from south-central Timor to the eastern region and is similar to six other Austronesian languages (Roti, Helong, Dawan, Galoli, Habu, and Kawaimina) spoken on the island (Hull 1993). These languages are spoken by the Dawan (Atoni) people, who comprise the majority in Indonesian West Timor, and by people on the island of Roti. On the other hand, Tetun is not similar to other Austronesian languages in the eastern part of the island of Timor (Tokodede, Kemak, Mambai, and Idalaka).

Meanwhile, the Trans-Papuan languages of Makasae and Fataluku are spoken by most people towards the eastern end of Timor-Leste. Thus, Tetun shares more linguistic characteristics with languages used in the western part of the island of Timor and shares fewer with languages in the eastern part of the island. The adop-



Map 2 Language map of the island of Timor (Fox 2000)

tion of Tetun by the Catholic church in Timor-Leste meant that the foundation for the interaction between Catholicism and local communities, specifically those in the ‘west’ of Timor-Leste, was established in the area more familiar with Tetun. On the other hand, it seems that the church and local communities had a tenuous relationship in the ‘east’ of Timor-Leste. However, Catholic culture is more deeply rooted in the Ermera District, where I worked with an NGO as a program officer, 2001–2002. People in Ermera explained the difference between them and the people of Lospalos, a town in the east, where Fataluku is used as the mother tongue. They explained, ‘Dogs in Lospalos bark when they see the moon, but in Ermera, dogs bark when they hear the bells of the church’. This expression is the eastern society’s mockery of Catholicism. This contrast between ‘east’ and ‘west’ in Timor-Leste seems to have strengthened further during the Indonesian occupation.

As described above, even in the western part of the island of Timor, which is Indonesian territory, Catholicism took root mainly in the current Belu Regency of the Republic of Indonesia, which is the ‘east’ of West Timor. These religious and linguistic settings may have been coincidental, but consequently, most indigenous people in this area across the border between Timor-Leste and Indonesian West Timor spoke Tetun.

## 5 Refugee Problem Viewed from Religious and Linguistic Settings

Catholic missionary activities implemented across the Dutch and Portuguese territories were initiated from the latter half of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century. Replacing the Jesuits, who moved their base to Portuguese Timor, the Society of the Divine Word began missionary work in Dutch Timor. The number of Catholics drastically increased during the Indonesian era. It could be considered that the Catholic conversion took place earlier in West Timor, which was integrated into the Republic of Indonesia, than in Timor-Leste, where the Catholic conversion took place after the 1980s. The rate of conversion to Catholicism accelerated during the 1980s, especially in the Wehali/Tetun language area in East Timor province, because Tetun was adopted as the liturgical language. Thus, Wehali/Tetun/Catholic culture was formed across East and West Timor.

Considering the presence of this Wehali/Tetun/Catholic culture, it could be considered that the people who moved from East to West Timor following the 1999 referendum temporarily took refuge in a familiar place. Such ‘voluntary’ migration of the East Timorese contradicts the discourse of ‘forced transportation’ discussed in association with the problem of East Timorese refugees. Newspaper articles and other articles distributed by NGOs reporting on the situation at the time stated that the estimated 250,000 to 300,000 people who moved to the western part of the island of Timor were mostly pro-independence groups who were forcibly taken by anti-independence militias or Indonesian forces. At the time of the crisis, when it

was difficult to find accurate data, the UNHCR and international NGOs began to provide humanitarian aid based on the assumption that most refugees were forcibly taken.

The UNHCR's understanding was that the refugee camps were under the control of anti-independence militias, and that many of the refugees staying in the western part of the island of Timor were 'people taken against their will', who were treated as 'hostages' in the camps. The UNHCR also believed that anti-independence militias were involved in massive human rights violations during the turmoil, which made their families and anti-independence groups reluctant to return. These people feared that they might suffer violence or experience social discrimination if they returned to Timor-Leste.

Based on these assumptions, the UNHCR conducted a radical repatriation operation to facilitate the return of 'pro-independence' refugees to Timor-Leste. The UNHCR blocked information related to its assistance to returning refugees from the anti-independence militias controlling the camps, secretly contacted pro-independence Timorese staying in the refugee camps, barged into the camps on trucks, forced the refugees to climb on board, and transported them to Timor-Leste.

The UNHCR had a base in Atambua and had administered humanitarian aid in refugee camps in the suburbs of Atambua. In September 2000, anti-independence militias attacked the UNHCR office murdered three staff. The UNHCR's report points out that the aggressive tactics to encourage returns increased the tension with anti-independence militias and triggered this attack. Following the incident, the UNHCR decided to temporarily withdraw from West Timor. Since there was a possibility that international NGOs would be targeted, all humanitarian aid organisations were forced to withdraw from West Timor after the incident.

The UNHCR's repatriation project to facilitate returns was carried out based on the assumption that most refugees were forcibly taken against their will. However, the truth remains unclear as to how many were pro-independence or anti-independence, or how many were taken against their will. Although the testimonies of those who returned revealed that some people were actually taken to Indonesian West Timor against their will by anti-independence militias and the Indonesian army, the number of these refugees remains unknown<sup>1)</sup>.

As previously discussed, many refugees voluntarily returned to Timor-Leste. It is likely that most people who were pro-independence and who fled to the western part of the island of Timor returned to Timor-Leste during the first two or three months. If so, the number of 'hostages' held by anti-independence militias among those who stayed in the refugee camps after the year 2000 is much lower than the UNHCR's estimate. Also, there is a possibility that many of those in favour of integration did not flee to West Timor but remained in Timor-Leste. Considering these possibilities, the assumption of the UNHCR's project to facilitate the return of the refugees no longer holds. Indeed, one senior UNHCR official stated that it

had overestimated the number of refugees ‘taken against their will’ (Dolan 2004: 51).

Malkki proposes that the UNHCR’s understanding of refugees is based on the ‘National Order of the Things’ and ‘sedentarist bias’ (1995). First, because the East Timorese refugees were East Timorese, victims of Indonesia’s violence, the UNHCR assumed that they had to be ‘protected’ from Indonesia. Second, the UNHCR assumed that these East Timorese people must want to return to Timor-Leste, their country of origin. In fact, people in Timorese society became conscious of a national border for the first time when Timor-Leste gained independence. As indicated here, many people in both east and west had kinship ties across the border, and the places they fled were those they were familiar with.

Humanitarian aid for refugees is usually given through a refugee camp structure on the assumption that many of the camp residents were forced to evacuate for unavoidable reasons and are living restricted lives in an unfamiliar land. However, not all the people staying at the refugee camps were unfamiliar with these areas, as evidenced by the account of one such refugee.

One of my brothers borrowed a truck and we fled with our parents and others on September 8th. We thought it was safer to depart separately than to go together, so my husband and children left first. I stayed, packed things, and then left. We stayed at our relative’s house in the village of Kalete for about a month. Because our children did not get along with the relative’s children, we moved to a refugee camp in Betun. The size of the temporary house at this refugee camp was about 5m x 6m. It was built simply with wood veneer and a corrugated iron roof. Six members of our family stayed there until December 2001. When returning to Suai, we went to the transit centre at the border on the UNHCR’s truck. There, we switched to the truck on the East Timor side. Lumber for building a new house and materials such as cement are very expensive in East Timor, so we purchased them in Betun and took them back with us (*from an interview with a refugee who returned to Suai*).

Many households took refuge in villages where their relatives lived, but some did not get along with the relatives and moved to refugee camps. In addition, because there were relief supplies at the refugee camps, some people moved to the camps voluntarily. These refugee camps provided a place where people were able to voluntarily seek temporary refuge.

## 6 Conclusion

Since 1912, the people of Suai have repeatedly fled to the land of Wehali at the onset of wars. People from the districts of Bobonaro and Ermera, and even those all the way from the district of Liquiçá, have also repeatedly fled to and settled in Wehali. This was the case during the Japanese military invasion in 1942. This pattern of migration and settlement indicates that people were connected across the



east-west border and that the southern part of Belu Regency was the core of their connection. Transferring the *lulik*, which can be viewed as sacred relics, to the land of Wehali was most important—even more than the migration of people.

The *uma lulik* (ancestral shrines) and *lulik* kept within are the core of the national culture of Timor-Leste. Independence movements in Timor-Leste used *uma lulik* in the Fataluku-speaking area Lospalos as the symbol of the national culture. Even in post-independence Timor-Leste, we often see them as monuments and souvenirs (Photo 2). The *uma lulik*, referred to as the centre of traditional culture in Timor-Leste, is a place for ancestral rituals. The *lulik* kept here are described in relation to the ancestral spirits.

I visited *uma lulik* in several hamlets in the western part of Timor-Leste (districts of Ermera, Bobonaro, and Covalima) and occasionally had the opportunity to go inside them. Some of the objects inside were crucifixes and bibles, but explained them as being related to Christianity. ‘Lulik = the sacred crucifix’, which is explained in association with ancestors’ spirits, was explained in West Timor as a ‘sacred crucifix = sacred relic’. According to Nahak, the transfer of a crucifix from West Timor to Timor-Leste involved the priest of the local Catholic diocese. One possibility is that the interpretation of *lulik* as sacred relics began to be accepted first in the Indonesian territory of West Timor, where Catholic culture is believed to have penetrated earlier than in Timor-Leste. On the other hand, in the western part of Timor-Leste, although the *lulik* were not explained as sacred relics, the objects



**Photo 2 (left)** Timor-Leste Pavilion at the Shanghai Expo. The roof at the centre back is the ancestral shrine (*uma lulik*) of Fataluku (Lospalos). Source: Photograph by the author, 2010.

**Photo 3 (right)** Inside the ancestral shrine (*uma lulik*) in Letefoho, Ermera District. There is a crucifix in front of the horns of water buffalo, which represent the ancestors. A bible is kept inside the wooden box on the left. Source: Photograph by the author, 2005.

enshrined there were crucifixes and bibles (Photo 3).

West Timor, which was part of the Dutch East Indies, and Timor-Leste, which was a Portuguese territory, were subjected to rule by different colonial governments and experienced missionary activities performed by different religious orders. However, the 'Catholic conversion' took place in and around the 'Wehali/Tetun language area' across the border between East and West Timor. I have explored the possibility that a cultural area in which the Catholic Church had a strong presence was formed as a result in Tetun society and spread across the border.

This is inconsistent with the 'ethnic minority issues' that often arise near borders upon the establishment of a nation-state for two reasons. First, the Tetun language group on the island of Timor is not a minority, but a majority language group. The 'Tetun/Catholic' population of the Indonesian territory of West Timor is about 200,000, while that of Timor-Leste is between 250,000 and 300,000. This population cannot be dismissed as a minority in the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, the total population of which barely exceeds 1,000,000. Second, there were no noticeable democratic movements led by Tetun/Catholic groups around the border. Surely, the cultural label of Wehali/Tetun was used as propaganda by the political party APODETI, which called for the 'reunification of Timor' at the end of the Portuguese era under the slogan 'integration with Indonesia', and by anti-independence groups at the time of the 1999 referendum. However, these groups did not receive majority support. It is believed that most local people were in favour of independence even in areas that border Indonesia, such as Suai.

The proliferation of pro-independence sentiments even near the border made it difficult for global humanitarian organisations to notice the religious, cultural, and human connections across the east-west border, which was strong enough to threaten the certainty of the national border. An estimated 250,000 to 300,000 people fled from Timor-Leste to West Timor as refugees after the 1999 referendum. This was an inexplicable migration of people in light of the past understanding of people in Timor-Leste. It may have been perceived as natural for many people to flee across the border because Timor-Leste became a battlefield. On the other hand, it was beyond the comprehension of international organisations and civic movement groups that the turmoil was caused by the Indonesian National Armed Forces and pro-Indonesian militias, and that over one third of the population of Timor-Leste moved to Indonesian territory, an 'enemy territory'. Therefore, they considered these 'refugees' as 'hostages' taken by Indonesia. Believing that the refugees were hostages, the refugee support organisation UNHCR pushed ahead with returning the refugees to Timor-Leste, while facing off against the pro-Indonesian militias that controlled the refugee camps. Consequently, the relationship between the UNHCR and groups in favour of integration into Indonesia worsened, resulting in a tragic attack on the UNHCR office and the brutal killing of its staff.

We cannot ignore the religious, linguistic, and cultural connections across the

east-west border as mere propaganda by anti-independence groups. They are not irrelevant to the 'east versus west' divide, which was considered a factor that led to post-independence turmoil in 2006. The 'east-west' division here is not a national division of Timor-Leste versus the Indonesian territory of West Timor, but a geographical division of the eastern region: the areas east of Dili (such as the Baucau District where Makasae is spoken as the mother tongue and the Lauten District where Fataluku is spoken as the mother tongue) versus the areas west of Dili (including the Ermera and Bobonaro districts, where Mambai and Bunak are spoken as the mother languages).

Generally, this idea of 'east versus west' was formed during the period of Portuguese colonial rule. Those from the east are termed *firaku*, and those from the west *kaladi*. The term *firaku* is derived from *vira ocu*, which means speaking to others with one's back to them. It also carries a connotation of insubordination and a spirit of independence. On the other hand, it is widely thought that *kaladi*, the term describing the characteristics of those from the west, is derived from the Portuguese word *calado*, which means quiet and passive. After the Pacific War ended, there were rivalries over commercial dealings at the market between the Bunak people in the western part of Dili and Makasae people in the eastern part of Dili. Some point to these incidents as a cause of the east-versus-west conflict. Conducting research in the Bunak society in the district of Ermera, Molnar often heard interviewees emphasise strong connections with the kingdom that existed in the southern part of the Belu Regency (Molnar 2010: 146).

Many people in the west of Timor-Leste were not necessarily politically in favour of integration into Indonesia. However, there was a certain cultural rift between the western part close to Wehali and the eastern part that had fewer ties with Wehali, which was one cause of potential instability in the unity of the people of Timor-Leste. An unstable nation-state around the border tends to maintain its geographical body through violence within the structure of the majority versus minority ethnic groups. This situation is unlikely to occur in the future in Timor-Leste, where no overwhelming majority group exists. There are no distinct 'east' and 'west' collective identities, but amid future political antagonism, this east-versus-west conflict could appear often as a cultural representation symbolising the unstable foundation of the people's unity in Timor-Leste.

## Note

- 1) Like the UNHCR, the media and human rights organisations reported that there were about 270,000 refugees, which was based on the estimation of 250,000 to 300,000 released by the UNHCR when the problem occurred, and that most were being held 'hostage' by Indonesia. Only a minority of people, 92,000, voted in favour of integration. However, the number of children who do not have the right to vote is not considered in this calculation. The UNHCR's report states that if each voter had two children, then the total number would exceed 270,000.

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