

## *Harbouring Traditions in East Timor: Marginality in a Lowland Entrepôt*

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Drawing on the literature of networks and marginality, this paper explores the social history of the small trading port of Com on the northeast coast of Timor. Com's marginality, as I define it, is constituted as a remote outpost of inter-island and trans-local trade networks of the Indonesian archipelago, and reproduced in its contemporary isolation from centres of economic power and processes of the global market. The paper draws on narrative traditions and documentary evidence to chart Com's fluctuating historical fortunes and contemporary cultural practices. In the fragile post-independence environment of Timor Leste, the resident population of Com is once again looking towards a creative engagement with external others in the hope of renewed prosperity.

### **Introduction**

The archipelagic history of Southeast Asia and the fluctuating fortunes of markets and settlements across the islands might be described in terms of two complementary analytical frameworks. The first of these approaches utilizes the spatial metaphor of nodes and networks with varying degrees of global, regional and/or local reach to characterise the shifting historical opportunities of trade and exchange. The relative prominence or obscurity of far-flung population centres is highly dependent upon their changeable economic engagement within dynamic and frequently contested spheres of political and economic interest. This general idea applies equally to pre-modern notions of kingship and domain as it does to the contested and actively manipulated strategies of colonialism (for example, Van Leur 1955, Anderson 1990, Helms 1993, Warren 1998, Ellen 2003).

An alternative but related approach focuses on the dynamics of relative marginality where complex interactions of commodity production and resource exploitation gave rise to the opportunistic

engagement of disparate centres and peripheral interdependencies. The celebrated study of Anna Tsing, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen* (1995), is positioned in this latter tradition. Tsing offers an analysis of the historical relations of power, local agency and economic dependency among mountain Meratus communities in southern Kalimantan. Subtitled ‘marginality in an out of the way place’ her narrative speaks to both the geographical remoteness of the region from centres of economic and political power, and to the active and ongoing processes of marginalisation that accompany hegemonic penetration of encompassing state forms.

A complementary set of perspectives on the processes by which regions come to be classified and represented in terms of marginality is offered in Tania Li’s edited volume, *Transforming the Indonesian Uplands, Marginality, Power and Production* (1999). In this work, Li and her colleagues explore the Indonesian uplands as a geographical and conceptual locale, ‘constituted as a marginal domain through a long and continuing history of political, economic and social engagement with the lowlands’ (1999:xvii). Li points out that marginality needs to be understood in terms of relationships rather than simple facts of geography or ecology. Nevertheless, the thematic ethnographic focus of this collection lies in the hinterlands and geographic uplands of Indonesia, areas consistently and historically defined (for the most part) as inferior, backward and remote from centres of power.

In the following paper I draw on these elaborated notions of network and marginality, but take as my focus an explicitly ‘lowland’ location, one that arguably reflects many of the historical and cultural qualities of the ‘marginal uplands’ despite its geographical accessibility to the external world. I refer specifically to the small coastal port of Com, located on the narrow foreshores of northeastern Timor (see Figure 1). Com’s marginality, as I define it here, is constituted both historically as a remote outpost of inter-island and trans-local trade networks of the Indonesian archipelago, and in its contemporary isolation from centres of economic power and processes of the global market. Like the upland histories of Indonesia characterised by Li, Com’s fluctuating fortunes and contemporary cultural practices represent the outcome of a complex history of a creative engagement and cultural production with external others.<sup>1</sup> As a coastal site and an historical entrepôt for diverse trading networks, Com has, for centuries, mediated exchanges and

<sup>1</sup> Spyer’s analysis of historical trade relations in the Aru islands presents a comparative regional study (2000).

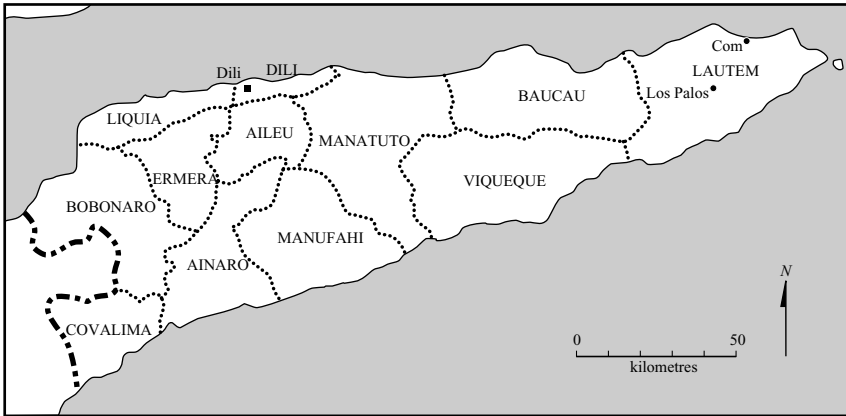


Figure 1. Map of East Timor.

flows between external trading interests and their Fataluku-speaking allies in the hinterland and forests of Lautem district, East Timor. For all this, however, Com remains an ‘entrepot on the margins’, one where recent political upheavals and uncertainty in the region have only highlighted its historical dependence on external economic interests to facilitate local prosperity and its political interdependence on state processes of control and appropriation. In the contemporary context of economic contraction and isolation, the future of Com remains uncertain and closely tied to the fortunes of the national East Timorese economy as a whole. However, as this paper seeks to demonstrate, the strategic opportunities afforded by Com’s geographical location and its adaptive local traditions that have long accommodated external interests to mutual benefit may well emerge again in a renewed round of negotiation that balances the demands of local autonomy and customary practice against state processes of incorporation and regulation. Drawing on local perspectives and shared memories, the following discussion charts something of the fluctuating historical fortunes of Com and its constituent coastal community.

Central to this theme is the position and role of the senior Fataluku land-holding and ritual authority of Com, the clan, *Konu (Konu Ratu)*. The name Com is, in fact, a Portuguese corruption of the Fataluku word, ‘Kon(u)’ and this merging of toponym and senior resident name group speaks to the ancestrally based and customarily asserted precedence of *Konu Ratu* as ‘traditional owners’ of the area. The history of Com is thus, to a significant degree, mirrored in the fortunes of the *Konu* clan and its collective capacity to sustain

local eminence. In the contemporary world of post-independence, post-colonial East Timor, the customary claims of Konu Ratu over land and resource tenures are challenged anew by state assertions of sovereignty and emergent processes of formal land administration and democratization.

### Post-Independence Com

The small seaport and village (*suco*) of Com is located on the north east coast of East Timor some 4 hours by road from the capital, Dili. With a current population of around 2,600 people, the main settlement comprises a series of hamlets clustered along the foreshore overlooking the Wetar Straits and the Indonesian island of Kisar just 20 km offshore. Behind the main settlement, the land rises dramatically to a limestone escarpment and plateau between 350 and 500 m above sea level. For much of the year the tropical landscape is parched and dry, and the hillsides are covered in degraded and patchy secondary bushland infested with invasive siam weed.<sup>2</sup> Hillside springs with their surrounding groves of coconut and tree crop gardens provide a patchwork of greenery. A gravel and bitumen road winds up from the coast to the plateau passing through the small hamlets of Etepiti, Pitilete and Ira Aonu and on to the present district capital of Los Palos some 15 km to the south.

The great natural advantage and resource of Com, which has had an abiding influence on the history and fortune of the settlement, is its deep-water sheltered anchorage. Much of the foreshore along the coast comprises a shallow reef platform which is exposed at low tide and limits maritime access to the coast. Com's indented deep-water topography therefore offers a strategic location, a feature enhanced by the massive headland of Loikere (Loiqueiro) to the east, which shelters the harbour from the southeast monsoon and the accompanying high sea swells.

In September 1999 when East Timor was in the grip of militia violence and destruction following the resounding vote against continued integration within Indonesia, Com served as a point of embarkation for pro-Indonesian groups fleeing the territory. In the tumultuous days following the intervention of the international military forces (*Interfet*), Indonesian armed forces, militia groups and their families and supporters along with hundreds of unwilling

<sup>2</sup> *Chromolaena Odorata*.



Figure 2. Ortho-photo of Com anchorage and settlement.

and terrorized pro-independence refugees were herded to the harbour and onto waiting ships. Sporadic violence and intimidation accompanied their departure and the settlement of Com was left a smouldering ruin.

Since then, the settlement has gradually returned to some semblance of order; houses rebuilt, village administration reinstated and regular, if infrequent, minibus services established to neighbouring settlements and the weekly market in Los Palos. For the majority of residents, everyday livelihoods are secured through a diverse range of near subsistence activities and opportunistic petty trading. Seasonal swidden cropping of maize in the hills behind the settlement is complemented with small holder rice production in favourable locations around Ira ara to the west. Limited cash incomes are secured from diverse dry season cultivation of red onions, small-scale sales of copra, tamarind pulp, and the distillation of palm wine as well as inshore fishing and the opportunistic hunting of birds, deer and feral pigs.

The achievement of national independence and the withdrawal of the Indonesian security apparatus have also permitted the residents of Com, as elsewhere in Lautem and across East Timor, to re-vitalize and re-engage many of the ceremonial exchange networks and ritual observances that were restricted under Indonesian military rule. Marriage and funerary rites, ancestral sacrifices, ritual invocations of clan identity and traditional house (*le ia valu*) construction and consecration among a complex variety of interactive exchange relationships now absorb considerable amounts of the time and resources of the Com community.<sup>3</sup>

In this newly liberated social environment, the ability to engage in elaborate ritual and symbolic activity has also encouraged the re-emergence of a range of customary practices previously subsumed and denied under Indonesian rule. These practices include a revitalised focus on ancestral religion, the emergence of traditional class distinctions, and a renewed interest in customary land tenures and assertions of landed authority at a time when formal systems of land administration in East Timor are yet to be promulgated through legislation.

While all residents of Com participate in these processes to varying degrees, I focus on one key group in Com, the clan Konu Ratu, whose collective assertions of an age-old and continuous political seniority in Com provide an entry point for understanding something of the social history and dynamics of this port settlement. I am conscious that this approach privileges a particular narrative interpretation, one that is both partial and inevitably contested in its detail and emphasis. However, the intimate and lasting association of Konu Ratu in Com is widely acknowledged and, on this basis at least, deserves attention as a case study of situated customary claim and attachment.

### **Konu Ratu and the Ancestral Domain: Ritual and Political Control of Com**

Across Fataluku society of far-eastern East Timor,<sup>4</sup> the concept of the *Ratu* represents a key social institution. The term may be glossed

<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that such activities were absent during 24 years of Indonesian occupation, but opportunities for their public expression were severely constrained by internal security restrictions on mobility and social gatherings.

<sup>4</sup> There are some 35,000 Fataluku language speakers in the East Timorese district of Lautem (Los Palos). A Papuan language (Trans New Guinea Phylum) in origin,

as a dispersed patrilineal clan with membership typically consisting of male kinsmen, their in-married spouses and children. The unity of the Ratu is characteristically articulated through affiliation with common male ancestors<sup>5</sup> and myths of origin, shared spiritual and ritual obligations with access to inherited common property and land in clearly defined localities. Social and personal identities of individuals are intimately connected and reproduced through the discursive frames of Ratu ritual practices and relation. These markers of affiliation and differentiation are expressed through inherited names, ritual knowledge and commensality,<sup>6</sup> as well as food proscriptions and textile designs (McWilliam 2004). Normative social relationships beyond closely related households are formulated around continuing and complex systems of exchange and marriage alliance between exogamous kin groups. All Fataluku settlements in Lautem represent composite patterned segments of inter-marrying Ratu.<sup>7</sup> There are dozens of named Ratu groups in Fataluku-speaking areas. Their frequently contested histories of segmentation, dispute and dispersal across the landscape provide the narrative basis for varying degrees of alliance and cooperation.

The Konu Ratu group and their emplaced focus in Com represent one expression of Ratu diversity within Fataluku society, arguably a comparatively unusual one, given their assertions of uninterrupted settlement within a narrowly defined domain surrounding the port of Com and the coastal waters. In exploring the significance of the Konu Ratu origin group in Com, I seek here to highlight two

Fataluku is related to the neighbouring non-Austonesian languages of Macassae (Baucau) and Macalero (Illiomar, Lautem), although they are mutually unintelligible. In the Portuguese literature, the language is often described as Dagada. This term, however, is probably an exonym from Macassae referring to speakers of the Sokolori dialect in western Lautem.

<sup>5</sup> Female ancestors of the Ratu may be significant in the oral histories of the group but the general emphasis remains on the continuity of male progeny and the Ratu name.

<sup>6</sup> A central and common marker of affiliation to named Ratu is the practice of kinsmen sharing sacrificial meat and offal known as the *leura te'i* (sacred meat). This is served separately in all sanctioned ceremonial events of the relational group and symbolizes common agnation.

<sup>7</sup> This general statement glosses a rather more complex social context in which historically defined status differences have produced three sets of inherited social classes, castes, or what Lameiras Campagnolo and Campagnolo have termed, *ensembles endogames* (1984:84), represented by the terms *Ratu*, *Paca* and *Akanu* (slaves). Although these have significant social implications in terms of inter-group relations, for the purposes of my argument, the generic form of the Ratu remains an appropriate description and serves as the principal social category of identification for most people.

key organisational features that have contributed to their political dominance over the area. They include an enduring ritual authority over the control of the inshore waters and the harbour of Com itself, and in historical terms, their political authority over the anchorage of Com and their capacity to defend their position from potential usurpers. These elements provide a customary basis of claim among the twenty or so resident contemporary Konu Ratu core households.<sup>8</sup>

In terms of social definition, Konu Ratu collective identity is founded on a shared understanding of ancestral origins and relation. Like other Fataluku clans, founding myths are associated with the maritime journeys of the ancestors in the distant past.<sup>9</sup> Mythic evidence of their origins is marked in the landscape by sacrificial altar sites (known as *calu ia mari* – ancestor footprints), typically located around the coastal fringe of Lautem, in ancestral graveyards (*calu lutur*) and in the striking limestone outcrops littering the landscape that are associated with the mythic sailing boats (*loiasu matar*: stone boats) of their ancestors (McWilliam 2004). Fataluku retain detailed knowledge of the itineraries of their ancestors who are thought to ensure the continuing vitality and health of their living descendants. Consequently, sacrificial invocation directed to ancestors and spirit beings along with agnatic commensality remain highly significant practices.

The Konu Ratu group also retains a range of continuing vital links with their coastal waters. This is a reflection both of their asserted long history of residence on the coast and their continuing mythico-ritual connection to the marine origins of their ancestors. In the latter respect the Konu Ratu originary ancestor takes the form of a dolphin (*roinu*) and the collective vitality of the Ratu is mediated through ritual communication with the seas and associated marine spirit creatures. According to one version of this myth, the Konu Ratu marine ancestor once observed a beautiful daughter of the Kocove Ratu group on the

<sup>8</sup> Ratu membership is generally dispersed both across Lautem and as far afield as Dili, Indonesia, Australia and even Europe as a consequence of colonial history and contemporary translocal work opportunities.

<sup>9</sup> The special exception to this general view is the self-identifying groups, Tutuala Ratu and Kati Ratu, whose mythic histories assert autochthonous origins, and claims to settling other immigrant Fataluku-speaking groups arriving within the territory. This may suggest an affiliation with prior Austronesian-speaking settlers in the region who are considered to have pre-dated Fataluku settlement (see O'Connor 2003 and McWilliam 2004).



coast of Com. Emerging from the water, the ancestor shed his skin, appearing in the guise of a man, and lay with the young woman in her house near the beach. Her subsequent pregnancy was noticed by male kin, who were angry and set up a watch over the house to identify the suitor. One night they saw the dolphin come to the beach, shed his skin (*ivele*) on the fringing seaweed and climb into the house. The men then grabbed their spears and stabbed the *Calu Konu* (Konu grandfather)<sup>10</sup> also setting fire to his skin. As he lay dying, the ancestor asked to be reunited with his skin and, having washed the remnant in seawater he entered its folds, becoming dolphin again and swam away. The male child of this union with the woman of Kocove Ratu<sup>11</sup> became the first Konu Ratu ‘human’ ancestor. Since that time there have been twenty-four generations<sup>12</sup> of progeny to the present day.<sup>13</sup>

The name *konu* in Fataluku means ‘night’ and refers to the time of arrival of the Konu ancestors in Com. Here they established their first settlement at *o’o lo kon* (lit: the mouth of Kon)<sup>14</sup> on the shore of the anchorage. From there they asserted their authority to the narrow harbour and rocky escarpment overlooking the sea, an area of little more than 10 km<sup>2</sup> in extent. The demarcation of their domain is said to have been defined ritually in conjunction with an early marriage ally, Tupuka Ratu, who utilized their renowned ‘sacred powers’ or *tei* to secure the boundary.<sup>15</sup> The boundaries were constituted through ‘sacred speech’ injunctions (*lukun teinu:: hopon teinu*) and the domain encompassed through the emplacement of sacrificial altar posts (*sikua*)

<sup>10</sup> This is the conventional term for the sea mammal, used by members of the Konu Ratu group.

<sup>11</sup> The mythic arrival of Kocove Ratu was via the back of a sea turtle (*ipitu*) but when the male affiliates of the Ratu died out, the rights and authority over the area were transferred to Konu Ratu as the principal affine.

<sup>12</sup> Other versions suggest thirteen to fourteen generations. Extended genealogical knowledge of named ancestors provides credence for this conviction although the names themselves are closely guarded and taboo (*mamunu*). In Fataluku terms, a generation refers to a male sibling set and it is the death of the last born (*moco vehula*) that signals its passing. This death may be marked ritually in a variety of ways including the reported retention of a last sibling’s tooth which is hung above the house shrine (*aca kaka*) of the senior Ratu leader.

<sup>13</sup> A veiled version here of the Austronesian stranger king myth whereby the outsider marries an autochthonous female of rank and assumes a ruling status (see Sahlins 1985).

<sup>14</sup> Reportedly, in the past the entrance to the anchorage was marked by two wooden posts or poles secured on the seabed.

<sup>15</sup> The practice of defining Ratu domain boundaries (*kai kai* or *varuku*) through ritual prohibitions (*lupure*) is found widely across Fataluku lands.

at named sites demarcating the ritual and territorial boundary. The principal altar site on an elevated point overlooking the Com embayment is known in veiled speech as *tei tei laliru* (the ‘high’ *tei*),<sup>16</sup> which my Fataluku colleague, Arlindo Fernandes Xavier, described as the *Letnan jenderal* for Konu Ratu and its allies. This is a reference to the protective spirit power of the *tei*, which is ‘fed’ (*fane*) annually in sacrificial invocations.<sup>17</sup>

In formal parallel<sup>18</sup> speech the Konu Ratu group in Com is characterised as the following:

<i>Ira Ratu :: Tei Ratu</i>	Water Ratu :: Sacred Ratu
<i>Ira Malae:: Tei Malai</i> <sup>19</sup>	Water Foreigner – King:: Sacred Foreigner – King

The phrase speaks to the continuing orientation and connection of the group to the seas, both in terms of their watery ancestral origins and as a realm they look towards for ritual succour and protection. As in the past leadership of the clan continues to be based on the designated and knowledgeable senior elder of the group, also referred to as the lord and master of words (*Nololonocawa: Lukulukunocawa*).

The contemporary significance of this connection can be seen in the practice of providing funerary rites to dolphins found dead on the shores of Com and the maintenance of a small ‘dolphin’ ancestor cemetery near the central sacrificial post of Konu Ratu on the rocky edge of the coast. Dolphins and other marine creatures also figure in contemporary Konu Ratu narratives of history and good fortune. Many personal names of Konu Ratu affiliates as well as those of their household animals are drawn from fish species.<sup>20</sup> Konu Ratu women upon marriage are referred to in ritual discourse as *roin(u) inalu* (‘dolphin mothers’). All residents of Com also participate annually in

<sup>16</sup> The term masks the mythic significance of the spirit agency of Tupuka Ratu’s ritual power [see Pannell for related discussion of *tei* and the *aka*]. Pannell, Sandra. 2006. Welcome to the Hotel Tutuala: Fataluku Accounts of Going Places in an Immobile World, in D. McKay (ed), Place in Motion: New Ethnography of Locality in the Asia-Pacific. *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*. Special Issue 7(3), 203–219.

<sup>17</sup> Further along the ridgeline is a second altar post (*sikua*) which protects livestock of the community.

<sup>18</sup> Described in various ways as *imi ta haca ca*’ (words joining words) or *a luku a ta’a* (speech and words), Fataluku formal speech reveals a high degree of linguistic parallelism.

<sup>19</sup> In this context the use of the Austronesian term *malai* by Fataluku refers to the status of ‘ruler’ or ‘king’ (see McWilliam 2004 for further elaboration).

<sup>20</sup> Personal names are owned and inherited within Ratu affiliations and may not be appropriated by others without agreement or permission.

the *meci* harvest (sea worm: *Eunice virides*), and the sardine spawning catch (*api lere*) when they briefly appear in abundant numbers in the coastal waters. I also recorded a recollection from one Konu Ratu man who spoke of his experience in Dili during the militia rampage of 1999, where he feared for his and his family's lives. At one point he made a ritual offering at the beachfront in Dili, calling on the fourteen sacred ancestors of Konu Ratu to assist them. A few hours later a large crocodile (*pui coloro*) was sighted off the beach, which he took to be a sign that his prayers had been answered and he was subsequently able to pass freely through the Militia cordon unmolested to Atambua in West Timor. This, he believed, demonstrated the agency of his maritime ancestors and why sea creatures such as dolphins, crocodiles and, dugong (*hoporu*) may not be killed or harmed.<sup>21</sup> The fact that in death the spirits of deceased members of the Konu Ratu are believed to return to the sea reinforces the cyclical interdependence of ancestral origins and contemporary living members of the group.<sup>22</sup>

The symbolic and ritual authority of Konu Ratu over the port of Com is also expressed in oral histories. One example, which speaks to Konu Ratu as a mediator of maritime trading relations, is the well-known story of the six circular black slabstones obtained in the past and known colloquially as the *batu Makassar*. At one time it is said, a Sulawesi boat kidnapped a pretty girl from the *cao hafa malae* (lit: head bone ruler) of Com, lifted anchor and began to sail away. Alarmed, the people ran to the nearby senior house of the *calu Kono* (ancestor Konu) for help. Smoking a cheroot as he listened to their anguish that their guns could not reach the departing boat, the Konu ancestor responded by flicking his smoke into the adjacent small creek where it transformed into a dolphin (*roinu*), which swam out to the ship and punched a hole in the hull. The 'Buton Makassar' had no choice but to return the ship and the girl to the shore. In compensation and as a sign of their future good faith, they offered the six black stones to Konu Ratu, which were divided between the elder and younger sibling houses and to the family of the *Cao Hafa Malae*.

<sup>21</sup> According to my Konu Ratu colleagues, the path of prayer to the ancestors is conveyed through a series of intermediaries including geckos, land lizards and crocodiles to the fourteen origin ancestors who ordinarily may not be named. I note here that in conventional Fataluku ritual offerings fourteen small piles of rice and meat are prepared (two rows of seven), which are directed to feeding (*fanê*) the ancestors.

<sup>22</sup> Symbolized by sprinkling a handful of sea sand (*iniku*) in the coffin to accompany the deceased on their spirit journey to join their elder (*kaka*) marine siblings.

The latter figure in this mythic account, translated as ‘head bone ruler’, is associated with an executive authority role within the domain achieved via treaty with the *Monagia* (adapted from the Portuguese, *Monarchia*) in the distant past. The contemporary position of the *Cao Hafa Malae*, from the clan, Fara Kati Ratu, is a contested one in Com to which I will return later. Here it is sufficient to note that the narrative fragments of Konu Ratu ritual connection to their maritime waters highlight, a fundamental aspect of customary assertions of tenure. Namely, that territorial and communal possession tends to be expressed in terms of an intimate ritual relation to their territory.<sup>23</sup> For this reason the status of Konu Ratu within the domain of Com is acknowledged to be that of ‘lord of the land’ (*mua ho cavaru*) and claims by other resident groups and Ratu segments are therefore subsidiary to, or nested within, the precedence and prior claims of the Konu Ratu origin settler.

The intimate ritual association that members of the Konu Ratu clan developed with their littoral domain was complemented by an assertive territorial authority and control over their coastal territory. Over the generations, members of Konu Ratu established settlement sites in numerous locations above the early central site of Kon (also known as *Kota*) adjacent to the anchorage. Evidence of remnant settlement sites, known as *lata paru*, are scattered across the landscape with their tell-tale signs of occupation in the form of aged coconut and areca palms, ancestral graves and residual stone walls. Senior Konu members can identify up to twenty of these named settlement sites all lying within the narrowly defined boundary of the domain. They represent the signs of Konu Ratu’s status as the primary land holder in the area and the material evidence of their long-emplaced connection.

Of particular significance in the narrative representation of Com, however, are the key locations of Kon [*o’o lokon(u)*: lit: the mouth of Kon] by the sea, and the limestone bluff of *Lor lafae*, overlooking the coast. The latter served as strategic defensive fort (*pamakolo*) for their southern land boundary. While the site of *Lor Lafae* has long been abandoned as a settlement,<sup>24</sup> it retains a key place in the contemporary representation of Konu Ratu history, during the period when the group

<sup>23</sup> See McWilliam 2002 for more general application of this principle.

<sup>24</sup> It is said that Konu Ratu still lived at *Lor Lafae* when the Portuguese first appeared off the coast in their *Caravel* (with its distinctive Christian cross on the mainsail). The old and still current settlement of Asi Renu overlooking the harbour developed after this period.

achieved prosperity and 'great wealth' through maritime trade. The general claim is that Konu Ratu was never defeated or usurped in the endemic inter-clan rivalry and warfare that marked so much of Fataluku history. In this representation, the defence of Com was the responsibility of two Konu Ratu siblings who held the position of war leaders (*halu ma'arau*). The younger sibling (*noko*) protected the land access to the port from their redoubt at Lor Lafae and is said to have 'guarded the forest' (*irinu toto*),<sup>25</sup> while the elder sibling (*kaka*) protected the coastal settlement at Kon and 'guarded the sea' (*tahi toto*). Graves of these ancestors are located in the respective sites and continue to be the site of sacrificial veneration.

The defence of the narrow Com domain protected the principal and lucrative natural resource of Konu Ratu, namely the deep-water anchorage and the revenue stream and goods which the dynamic maritime trading opportunities offered. In the past, when Konu Ratu retained its political autonomy, all ships that docked at the small port were required to pay 'harbour fees' (*tahi hi'are*: sea payments). As the clan expanded demographically, local historians also recall the development of a division of authority over landing fees with traders. This is represented in terms of three constituent houses or lineages of Konu [*Moco kaka* (firstborn child), *Moco (u)lu penu* (second born) and *Moco vehula* (youngest child)]. Each group reportedly developed formal arrangements with a series of maritime traders who paid their landing fees to one of the respective lineage groups. Just how this system may have operated in detail remains unclear but the emphasis in this summary account of Com history is the assertion of a continuing pre-eminent authority of the Konu Ratu group. It reflects a period when the reputation of Konu Ratu as *orang kai*<sup>26</sup> (from Malay meaning 'wealthy people') and *Kapitan laut* (Captain of the sea) spoke to their position as an integral node in a maritime network of archipelagic proportions. Like entrepôt elsewhere their prosperity rested not on their control over extensive land resources or

<sup>25</sup> Formerly in Lor, a large drum (*titiru*) was sounded when enemy forces were sighted. People would flee to the safety of the barricaded settlement along with their livestock that responded to the drum beat.

<sup>26</sup> A term used widely across the Malay trading world including the neighbouring islands of Moluccas, where the *Orang kaya* represented an oligarchy of elders from small but wealthy communities who had established a 'mercantile aristocracy' (see Villiers 1981:728–729, Goodman 1998).

numerous subject populations, but their strategic position as economic mediators of trade and the terms of exchange.<sup>27</sup>

### Marginal Wealth: An Entrepôt in an 'out of the Way' Place

The literature on the great maritime trading networks of southeast Asia makes scant direct reference to Com.<sup>28</sup> This may reflect its comparative unimportance in trans-regional trade, a distant outpost attracting little attention (Telkamp 1979). But in relative terms and especially from a local perspective, the memory of Com's significance provides an enduring source of legitimacy for the claims and assertions of contemporary authority by members of the Konu group. Here I draw on local accounts to explore something of that significance.

That the island of Timor formed part of an ancient maritime trading network is not in dispute. One Chinese report from 1436 (Groeneveldt 1880:116) informs us that the island of Timor, pronounced *Ti-mun*, was 'covered with sandal trees'. It also mentions the twelve trading ports on the island where Chinese traders brought gold, silver, porcelain, textiles and coloured silks to exchange for products of the island.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> This description is highly consistent with depictions of the former *sosolot* trade of southeastern Seram. The term was defined by the seventeenth-century explorer, Johannes Keys, as a marked jurisdiction of a hill or harbour where a flag was planted and where no other may trade on pain of death (van Hille 1905:262, cited in Goodman 1998:423, see also Ellen 2003 for discussion of the trading complex).

<sup>28</sup> One of the complications of the historical record is the uncertainty surrounding the name of the port known as 'Com'. Leitao, following a report of seventeenth-century Timor Governor, Pimentel, ventures the thought that Com may have been referred to in the past as Adê (1948:151). Adê is mentioned as a significant trading port for the Portuguese in the early seventeenth century but more or less disappears from the literature by the early eighteenth century (see Loureiro 1995:121, 145). Rouver, intriguingly, refers to the northeast ports of Manatuto, Hon and Ade, noting that they all fell under the sway of the Makassarese king, Toemamalijang, in the 1640s (2002:235, 279). The relationship between Com, Hon and Ade therefore remains somewhat indeterminate (see McWilliam in press-b for further discussion on this point).

<sup>29</sup> Drawing from the nautical compendium *Shun Feng Hsiang Sung* (Fair Winds for Escort) composed around 1430, Mills (1979:74) has identified more specific information about the Chinese trading routes to Timor including the likely names of some of the main trading ports around the island. Of particular interest is the mention of the name, *Lui Kuei*, on the north coast of Timor, which Mills (1979:85) associates with the name Loiqueiro (pronounced *loikere* in Fataluku). The name refers to both the headland and an anchorage some 10 km to the east of Com from which,

The key commodity sought from Timor by Chinese traders was high-quality sandalwood that grew in abundance on the island. Moreover, it was the Portuguese conquest of the great trading mecca of Malacca (Malaysia) in 1511 that initiated the century's long struggle for control over the source of this valued commodity in Timor. The intervention of the Portuguese and their competition with the Dutch East Indies Company (VOC) and regional powers such as Makassar, Bone (Sulawesi), Buton and Tidore (Moluccas) between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries created the conditions for dynamic opportunities in the sandalwood trade from Timor.<sup>30</sup>

From their strategic site, Konu Ratu was well placed to provide these commodities in abundance. According to local histories, the stony and rugged hinterland of Com, rising to the coralline plateau above the sea, was once heavily forested in sandalwood (known as *ete mukiaru*). Over generations the plunder of this resource has severely depleted natural stocks. However, extensive sapling regrowth of sandalwood in the more heavily forested hinterland to the east, on the limestone escarpment plateau and along the road south of Com towards the settlements of Asaleno and Luarai is indicative of former extensive sandalwood reserves.

In addition to locally available stocks, Com's mediating position between the maritime traders and inland Fataluku settlements also enabled Konu Ratu to draw on sandalwood sources from a much wider area. These alliance networks with counterpart domains in the interior ensured a continuous flow of the fragrant heartwood to the Chinese, Makassan/Butonese, Dutch and Portuguese trading ships.<sup>31</sup> These complex trans-regional trading and exchange networks also articulated with more local engagements commonly associated with the southwest Moluccas, such as Wetar, Leti and nearby Kisar Islands.

given this proximate reference, we might infer that Com formed an integral part of this ancient Chinese trading network.

<sup>30</sup> For perspectives on the complex and shifting entanglement of European sandalwood trade relations with Timor and the immediate region, see Gunn (1999:51–67), see also De Freycinet's comments (1827:688–694, Boxer 1948, de Roever 2002).

<sup>31</sup> As the historian Boxer has recorded, '[A]n English merchant who called at Batavia (Java) in 1625, reported that between 10 and 22 Portuguese galliots called at Macassar yearly from Macao, Malacca and ports on the Coromandel coast. . . They arrived in December and left again in May, using Macassar as a entrepot for the sale of Chinese silks and Indian cotton textiles, which they exchanged for sandalwood in Timor' (1948:177).

As a trading and provisioning centre, Com supplied a wide variety of foodstuffs and goods to visiting ships. They included cultivars such as rice (*virahana*), maize (*cele*)<sup>32</sup> or its processed equivalent in boiled, pounded and dried form (*ke'elana*). Tubers and forest fruits, areca nut and betel pepper, tobacco, wild honey, bananas, pumpkins, copra, mandarins, goats, dried venison and varieties of smoked meats are also mentioned among a rich diversity of tradeable goods. Beeswax was collected from wild forest hives,<sup>33</sup> while tamarind seeds and pulp were reportedly traded from the extensive groves of trees (*kai'i lemu*) that formerly grew in abundance along the foreshore of the Com anchorage.<sup>34</sup>

But as the oral history of maritime trade with Timor amply demonstrates, provisioning of ships was really only supplementary to higher-value commodities supplied by the island. Locally produced sandalwood formed one component of this supply, human slaves the other. Konu Ratu oral tradition also acknowledges their ancestors' former active participation in slave trading as a commodity that sustained and enhanced their reputation and wealth in the area.

Slave trading out of Timor is of uncertain antiquity but appears to have provided an important motivation for the extension of trading networks to the island, along with the attraction of sandalwood. Slavery in eastern Indonesia flourished following both the adoption of Islam across the Indonesian archipelago and the rise of European mercantilism and colonialism in Southeast Asia. As Reid has noted, with the islamicization of Java and the extension of *Shari'a* law forbidding enslavement, the major Muslim cities from late sixteenth century were supplied with slaves from beyond the frontier of Islam. Certain small sultanates, notably Sulu, Buton and Tidore, began to make a profitable business of raiding for slaves in eastern Indonesia (1988:133). Entrepreneurial slaving by Dutch traders during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries also included Timor within

<sup>32</sup> Introduced by the Portuguese into the Moluccas by the mid-sixteenth century (Cinatti 1964:180) and cultivated throughout Timor by the late seventeenth century (Fox 2003:108) (Dampier 1699 is the relevant report).

<sup>33</sup> Beeswax had long been an important exported trade item. Gunn notes that during the early nineteenth century the annual quantity of wax exported from Portuguese ports in Timor was 20,000 *piculs* sold for 5 Spanish dollars a *picul* and destined for markets in Bengal and China (1999:115).

<sup>34</sup> These stands of tamarind, of which only a few gnarled specimens remain, were protected under customary prohibitions (*te'i*) until the Indonesian occupation when the wider local population was concentrated in Com and forced to transform the forest into food gardens.



their catchments.<sup>35</sup> Under the Dutch East Indies Company (VOC), for example, Kisar, the nearby small island to the north of Com, reportedly functioned as a transit station for slaves who were sent to work the nutmeg plantations on Banda (Maluku) (Rodenwaldt 1927:19).<sup>36</sup>

A further attraction of sourcing slaves from non-Islamicized islands like Timor, as Reid has also observed, was that '[S]ince slave export (is) almost invariably linked with internal disunity, the stateless societies and micro-states of eastern Indonesia, New Guinea, Bali and Nias were consistently among the exporters' (1988:133). Pre-modern Fataluku society is a testament to this condition as the landscape of Lautem is littered with massive stone barricaded forts that reflect a long history of inter-clan rivalry and warfare.<sup>37</sup> Contemporary commentators associate this period, which lasted until well into the nineteenth century, with the rise of slavery and the emergence of a slave caste (*akanu*) whose descendants remain widely recognized to the present time. Enslavement of war captives and rival groups was a product of endemic warfare and simultaneously provided a trading commodity to secure the means of warfare in muzzle loader guns (*fotu*), ammunition (*fotu kafu*) and gunpowder (*aranaku*).

Konu Ratu control of their trading port allowed for the lucrative exchange of human slaves in return for just these commodities. Local tradition recalls former direct exchanges of able-bodied human slaves with Makassar (Sulawesi) traders for gunpowder transported in large bamboo containers. In these exchanges one large container was traded for one slave (*tau tau ukani = ma'alauhana ukani*).<sup>38</sup> Benefits from the

<sup>35</sup> Greatly enhanced by an ordinance of 3 October 1703, which permitted voyages to Timor and Makassar specifically to obtain slaves under license from the Governor-General (of the Dutch East Indies Company [VOC]) (Fox 1983:259). See also De Freycinet's comments on slavery in Timor in the early decades of the nineteenth century (1827:694, 708).

<sup>36</sup> Kisar, now an island under Indonesian sovereignty, has had little interaction with Com in recent years, but its proximity led to extensive trading and alliance networks in the past (see Josselin de Jong 1937, see also Gunn (1999:150) regarding Timorese alliance relationships with Kisar).

<sup>37</sup> Some recent archaeological excavations of these hillforts suggest indicative dating from the early seventeenth century (Peter Lape, personal communication by Email, 2 Oct. 2004).

<sup>38</sup> In this regard Reid has noted that, under King Tunipalangga (1548–66), bricks, gunpowder, cannon and various other items were first manufactured in Makassar (Sulawesi) (1988:136). Trade with the Dutch is also inferred in Reid's related note that 'The Dutch bought up almost ten thousand Karimata axes and parangs (from Karimata in Southern Borneo) in 1631 and eight thousand in 1637, finding

mediated control of this trade were understandably substantial. Konu Ratu formerly had large numbers of slaves who served the ruling house, preparing gardens, tending animals, cutting timber and tapping palm juice for the production of liquor (*tua harak*). Additional slaves for trade were also secured from allied Ratu groups in the hinterland; all seeking weaponry to defend their home territories and avoid the threat of enslavement themselves should they be unable to repel their own enemies.

An example of the links to the regional hinterland is the alliance created with the strong interior domain of Luarai under the authority of Pai'ir Ratu, which shared a boundary with Com on the escarpment. The alliance established a continuing relationship of exchange between coast and hinterland.<sup>39</sup> Konu Ratu was granted opportunities to farm agricultural lands on the southern forested plateau, Pai'ir Ratu gained access to the sea. The communities were connected along a designated path of communication and exchange from the southern highlands to the coast referred to as the 'great path' (*ia lafae*) along which commodities and goods would be transported. In this way, Pai'ir Ratu strengthened their own position and participated in the sandalwood and slave trade. In exchange, and in addition to the acquisition of key articles of war, external trade also provided a range of desired luxury commodities that contributed to the reputation of Konu Ratu and its allies, as a region of prosperity and wealth.<sup>40</sup> Red palm sugar syrup (*tua lemusu*) from Rote and Buton, high-quality silk and printed cotton textiles (*kembati*), metal knives, porcelain and ceramic plates (*ra'u*), as well as silver and gold ornaments are reported among the diverse range of goods acquired (see also Gunn 1999:65). All contributed to the lucrative bounty upon which Konu Ratu and its allies built and defended their ancestral sovereignty as a self-governing Fataluku domain.<sup>41</sup>

them indispensable in the local Indonesian trade even as far away as Timor' (Reid 1988:136).

<sup>39</sup> Technically the alliance relationship was referred to by the phrase, *zeu tuare, moco tuare*, meaning to exchange the wife and child. It refers to a former practice in which the Ratu men treated each other as siblings, sharing their wives and belongings and participating in commensality of sacrificial meat (*leura te'i*).

<sup>40</sup> A similar political alliance was forged with the Kati Ratu domain, Soikele, on the upland plain of Nari to the southwest of Com.

<sup>41</sup> Here it should be noted that the Portuguese historical records are generally silent on the political composition of Fataluku local polities. Mention is frequently made to the *Reino* of Sarau and Faturó from the early eighteenth century, but it is not

## Incursions Upon Konu Ratu Autonomy: Colonialism and State Encompassment

Narrative representations of Konu Ratu in Com posit a politically autonomous ancestral past. While the historical literature provides no clear record of when, and to what degree, this autonomy was compromised and eroded, it is likely to be associated with the development of Portuguese colonialism in Timor and the beginnings of formal state processes of incorporation and dependency. Evidently integration was gradual and piecemeal, given that, over the long period of the Portuguese presence in Timor, any capacity to exert territorial control and sovereignty over their dominion was extremely limited and subject to frequent reversals. Gunn notes, for instance, that 'the continuing threat of revolt and the theft of revenue by adventurers and freebooters working the long unguarded coast severely constrained attempts to establish anything resembling a colonial economy and administration' (1999:86). It was not until 1851, for example, that the Portuguese colonial government began constructing a secure stone fort (*fortaleza*) in Lautem some 15 km to the west of Com, which later formed their principal military base for the region<sup>42</sup> (Gunn 1999:125). This initiative followed a series of punitive military campaigns in 1847–48 in part to stem the 'illegal' trade in sandalwood and other commodities with offshore islands of Wetar, Kisar and Leti under Dutch control (Pelissier 1996:211, Gunn 1999:159). For many decades, successive Portuguese administrations contented themselves with creating loyal vassals through treaties and then extracting tribute or *fintas* (Gunn 1999:96) in the form of in-kind payments of diverse commodities (see Leitao 1974:145–161).

An indication that Com may have forged a comparatively early treaty with the Portuguese can be inferred from a 1703 reference to the *Reinos* 'subject to Portuguese governance' where the eastern *reino* of, *Hum* is mentioned (Leitao 1948:150).<sup>43</sup> In addition to the *finta* tribute, for settlements like Com, the Portuguese also gradually

clear whether or not Com was ever a vassal of these rulers. Com affiliates deny every paying tribute to Sarau formerly based at Malailada on the coast near Lautem.

<sup>42</sup> The military district of Lautem was created in 1869 and formed the basis of the administrative division that continues in somewhat modified form into the present day (Correa 1934:277).

<sup>43</sup> See also the letter of Antonio Coelho Guerreiro, then Governor of Timor and Solor in Lifao, De Matos (1974:336–339). This probably refers to the same location as the port of *Hon* mentioned by Roever (2002:236).

established a system of 'port' duties to tax external trading activity and collect customs receipts (Gunn 1999:124). This development suggests a significant shift in the political relationship between the Portuguese and Timorese domains, one that represented a diminution of local capacity to assert sovereignty and customary control over their resources. Conversely, the capacity of the Portuguese to monitor and control the arrangements was chronically weak and allowed for considerable leeway for local indigenous authorities to act independently.<sup>44</sup>

The initial alliance with the *Monargia*, as Fataluku generally refer to the early Portuguese, had at least one immediate and enduring impact on the customary political organization of Com and its neighbouring settlements. Konu Ratu perspectives indicate that their ancestors initially rejected an offer of alliance with the Portuguese, arguing that their authority over Com was already long recognized and well established. In various narrative depictions they recall that their ancestors withdrew into the hills upon the arrival of the Portuguese ships. In their place, another group known as Fara Ratu accepted the insignia of office from the *Monargia* in the form of a flag (*bandera*),<sup>45</sup> a ceremonial staff (*falo*) and a contractual treaty (*liveru*). Subsequently, in a manner that remains contested, the position was assumed by a segment of the Kati Ratu group when the male line of Fara Ratu died out. This created an executive authority in the Com area referred to as the *Cao Hafa Malae* (Head Bone Ruler) and gave a notional diarchic character to local authority. Konu Ratu maintained their ritual authority over Com, but governmental responsibilities and, presumably, administrative dealings with the Portuguese were relegated to the *Cao Hafa Malae*,<sup>46</sup> who formerly resided in an elevated barricaded settlement east of Com known as Ili vali. Contemporary Konu Ratu representatives, however, reject the claims and legitimacy of the present representative of the *Cao Hafa Malae* to assert any authority over what they regard as their

<sup>44</sup> For example, Figueiredo has noted the complaints of Governor Viera Godinho (1784) about the volume of contraband trade with Dutch, Chinese and Macassan merchants dealing especially in sandalwood and slaves (2000:710–711).

<sup>45</sup> Konu Ratu claim to have their own flag coloured blue 'like the sea', but its origins are uncertain.

<sup>46</sup> This title is found in a number of areas within Lautem, always associated with the Portuguese. However, its pattern is variable across the region and some groups maintain the status of both 'Lord of the Land' (*Mua ho cawaru*) and *Cao Hafa Malae* within the same Ratu.

own prior traditional rights. Nevertheless the existence and historical acknowledgement of this position, one that clearly served to mediate relations between Portuguese colonial rule and local affairs, suggests a shift in the previously unchallenged position of Konu Ratu as the sole arbiters of their own affairs. The *Cao Hafa Malae* was accorded the military title of *Tenente Coronel* by the Portuguese probably in the early eighteenth century following the introduction of these military titles by the Portuguese.

The extension of Portuguese suzerainty and dominion over the colonial outpost of East Timor was a protracted process continually disrupted by numerous local rebellions and resistance. By the time the colonial authorities were able to exert a more thoroughgoing administration, it is likely that the fortunes of Com as a prosperous entrepôt were already fading. The great bounty that was sandalwood had been in long-term decline from the boom days of the seventeenth century although trade in declining quantities continued into the twentieth century (McWilliam 2003:312). Export opportunities for the trade in human slaves were similarly curtailed, particularly after the Kingdom of Portugal forbade slavery by 1875 (Kammen 2003:8), but also probably in response to the reduction of internecine warfare within the district of Lautem itself which limited the availability of war captives.

From the middle eighteenth century, Hum (or Com) is no longer mentioned as a principal *Reino* in Portuguese records, perhaps indicating a demise in the fortunes of the entrepôt as a political and economic force of at least regional proportions (see deCastro 1876:314).<sup>47</sup> But more likely to point to a period of renewed autonomy from a colonial regime that had struggled to maintain administrative control. By the late nineteenth century, Com and the wider region had clearly distanced themselves from Portuguese authority, evading taxes and conducting their own inter-island trade, particularly in firearms and gunpowder (Pelissier 1996:211, see also Cardoso 1933 for commentary on early-twentieth-century trade). In 1902, a heavily armed Portuguese force arrived by boat at the Lautem garrison and embarked on a punitive campaign across the region to assert

<sup>47</sup> De Matos lists up to eighty identified *Regulado* by 1760 and does not include the *Rey de Hum*, but acknowledges the difficulty of identifying all of the customary political units in Timor (De Matos 1974:161). Sherlock (1983:15) notes that Portuguese officials ceased giving official recognition to the existence of *reinos* in some areas including Lautem.

their colonial authority (Oliveira 1940).<sup>48</sup> A 'rebel' concentration was found to be based in the 'principal coastal village' of Com (Pelissier 1996:211–212). The Portuguese attacked from the southern plateau and quickly vanquished the rebel community that reportedly yielded fifty-four prisoners and fifteen human heads in the skirmish. From this time it appears that Konu Ratu fully acceded to Portuguese rule, providing 'abundant spoils' and labour for subsequent work projects. They also established amicable relations with the colonial administration assuming the title of head (*Chefe do Suco* and *Liurai*) for an expanded village of Com numbering more than 400 people in 1918 (Report of the Military Command 1918:109).<sup>49</sup> The education of leading members of the Konu Ratu group also enabled Jose Christovão (Konu Ratu *moco kaka*) to be appointed *Sekretaris* of the whole region of Lautem (*Conseho*), and his classificatory sibling Pedro Fernandez Xavier (Konu Ratu *moco ulu penu*) became head of the sub-district (Posto) of Com. Crumbling Portuguese buildings near the port stand as evidence of a determined, if limited, colonial administration and government influence. The principal focus for the Portuguese was the development of plantation agriculture, especially for coconuts and coffee (Lencastre 1929:44–46). Copra was one of the regular commodities exported out of Com in the early twentieth century.<sup>50</sup>

By the twilight years of Portuguese rule in East Timor in the 1970s, Konu Ratu still retained their headship over Com through the local authority of Tomas Fernandez Xavier, who had assumed the position from his father. But while the group maintained authority over local administrative affairs, they had lost control over the terms of external maritime trade which, by then, offered a much-diminished revenue stream. Com appears to have become another sleepy and remote regional port of a distant and economically impoverished Portuguese colony (Telkamp 1979:80). The trickle of development that found its

<sup>48</sup> The campaign utilized Timorese militias (*moradores*) from the district of Manatuto, Baucau and allied groups from the domains of Faturu, Sarao and Sama in western Lautem. Pelissier notes that the region had not seen a campaign of such size since 1889 when the Portuguese attempted to assert their authority and put an end to the 'illegal trade' in sandal, goats and sheep as well as guns and gundpowder with the offshore Dutch-controlled islands of Wetar, Kisar, Leti and Tapa (1996:210). The impact of this campaign gave rise to the Fataluku term, Savarika (scorpions) in reference to the Portuguese.

<sup>49</sup> The Posto administrative division of Com (Kon) was established under Portuguese administration in 1916 (Report of the Military Commander 1918:109).

<sup>50</sup> A Portuguese report from 1918 also mentions the sale of conch shells gathered along the coast to Chinese merchants (1918:108).

way to Lautem by then was increasingly transported along the paved road from Dili to the capital Los Palos largely bypassing the small port on the north coast.<sup>51</sup> A degree of local maritime trade continued via inter-island networks and nearby islands such as Kisar and Leti.<sup>52</sup> But much of this operated outside official approval as 'contrabandistas' and for these reasons tended to be limited in scale.

### **Prosperity and Persecution Under Indonesian Rule**

The Indonesian military invasion of the territory in 1975 brought with it another significant shift in the fortunes of Com and its residents. The location of the port provided a strategic access and supply point for the Indonesian armed forces in the east. In early December 1975, in the face of an overwhelming military threat, Com residents fled into the forested hills, many making their way, like much of the population of Lautem, to the temporary and precarious security of the great mountains of Matebian in Baucau district. As in previous (and subsequent) periods of political turmoil, Fataluku sought refuge and security in the rugged forests of the hinterland. Here they eked out an existence under armed Fretilin protection until capitulation and surrender in 1978 when the surviving population straggled back to Los Palos under Indonesian military supervision.

During the ensuing years, the area was maintained under tight military surveillance gradually lessening as the Indonesian authorities asserted their authority over the region. During this difficult period, a series of events occurred, which further modified the customary standing and authority of the Konu Ratu group in Com. Firstly, under Indonesian internal security provisions, the wider population of the area was concentrated into a single settlement along the Com beachfront. This included the old settlements of Loho Matu and Mua Pusu (formerly Ili Vali) to the east of Com that had long maintained a separate historical landed identity under the authority

<sup>51</sup> During WWII, an airstrip was constructed in Com but has long since fallen into disuse.

<sup>52</sup> Leti and Kisar formed part of a traditional maritime trading network covering the small islands of southwest Maluku west from Luang. The extent to which Com and other ports in Lautem also participated in these complementary commodity trading systems (see van Engelenhoven 2004:4) requires further research but they look to have strong cultural affinities. Tomaz indicates that Kisarese were focusing on their goat and poultry trading in Lautem (1971:9).

of separate Ratu clans. Their forced relocation, and the directive to cultivate food gardens in the immediate vicinity of the new settlement, effectively over-rode the customary authority of Konu Ratu. In the circumstances, local people had little choice, and any claim of Konu Ratu traditional rights along the beachfront was effectively over-ruled and notionally re-classified under Indonesian agrarian law, as 'state land' (*Tanah Negara*) to be allocated as needed. Much of the foreshore was subsequently divided into house blocks and apportioned under the settlement concentration policy, although no agreement was ever reached over tenure arrangements with Konu Ratu landholders and the situation remains unresolved to date.<sup>53</sup>

The Indonesian construction of a new port facility at Com between 1986 and 1987 also demonstrated a political acquiescence on the part of Konu Ratu to any assertion of customary authority and claim over their historical anchorage. Once again there was no alternative, given the political environment of the time. Reportedly, the Indonesian government offered an amount of compensation (*ganti rugi*) for the appropriation of the site for public purposes,<sup>54</sup> which was subsequently refused. This is consistent with more general Fataluku attitudes to the concept of 'compensation' for land alienation, which is regarded as synonymous to its sale, and strongly resisted because of ancestral sanctions against commercial land transfer. However, in place of compensation, senior Konu Ratu men reportedly asked instead for the resources to undertake a ritual sacrifice before their altar post at *o'o lokon* adjacent to the anchorage, in order to ensure the safety of the government and local residents in their development plans.<sup>55</sup> This was agreed to, and the subsequent ceremony to 'feed the sacred' (*fane te'i*) served to reinforce the ritual authority of Konu Ratu at Com while nominally ceding executive power to determine development futures. Under the Indonesian government, all landing taxes, harbour charges and the overall management of trade to and from the Port was appropriated by the state through government bureaucracy and military control.

<sup>53</sup> One of the underlying issues here is that the settlers from Mua Pusu and Loh Matu have never been placed under the protective spiritual authority of the Konu Ratu ancestral sphere (*tei tei la liru*). As 'strangers' they remain exposed to unseen threats and ill fortune.

<sup>54</sup> Officially required under Indonesian legislation but frequently bypassed during their period of occupation of East Timor (Fitzpatrick 2002).

<sup>55</sup> This takes the form of a ritual request to the spirit authorities of the land (*li'se parite i ucute*).



Nevertheless, the period of Indonesian rule in East Timor to 1999 brought with it something of an economic revival for Com. Regular twice weekly ferries from Ambon (Maluku) via Kisar and on to Kupang in West Timor fostered local trading activity. Com was also utilized as a military supply depot and an army disembarkation point for battalions withdrawing from, and arriving for, active duty against the resistance movement. This activity, in turn, fostered the local development of petty trading, restaurants and food stalls by local entrepreneurs and contractors. The economic bustle provided a veneer of economic prosperity that hid the continuing depredations of military attempts to eradicate clandestine resistance. Members of the Konu Ratu clan and others loyal to the independence cause were among the victims of the struggle.<sup>56</sup>

The changing face of Com, and the multiple negotiated adjustments required under Indonesian rule, resulted in a somewhat surprising shift in local administrative leadership in 1998. In that year, Edmundo da Cruz, a Mua Pusu man from the clan Kati Ratu and claimant to the title of *Cao Hafa Malai*, was elected village head (*Kepala Desa*), defeating the Konu Ratu candidate, Anselmo Fernandes Xavier, in the ballot. For the first time in living memory, Konu Ratu lost its formal position of leadership over Com and accepted the elevation of the *Cao Hafa Malai* to the position of regional headship.<sup>57</sup>

### Post-1999 and the New Economic Landscape

If Indonesian rule served to subsidize maritime-based economic opportunities in Com, post-independence has seen a marked downturn in its economic fortunes. This is most conspicuously seen in the absence of an effective market economy for engaging in trans-local trade. As a result of the withdrawal of Indonesia and the sputtering economic progress of East Timor, economic opportunities for residents

<sup>56</sup> Fretilin armed resistance in Lautem continued throughout the period of Indonesian occupation, and local residents of Com at considerable personal risk, provisioned guerrillas in the hills for long periods, including for a period the then resistance leader, Xanana Gusmao, hiding in the scrubby limestone backcountry.

<sup>57</sup> I have noted earlier the contested view of the relationship between Konu Ratu and the *Cao hafa Malae*. Konu Ratu regard the present incumbent, the *Chefe do Suco*, as only in office because of Indonesian support, while Edmundo responds by recalling his own ancestor's claims that Konu Ratu usurped his rightful position as leader of the people (*reino ho fuku*).

of Com are significantly diminished. From a local perspective and in common with much of the wider region, discontent over the lack of marketing opportunities for local produce and resources tends to be directed towards the new national government that appears long on rhetoric and short on practical assistance to support local initiatives. Petty trading and diverse small-scale commercial exploitation of local resources combined with evidently increased levels of ceremonial exchange provide sustenance but not prosperity to contemporary residents.

Perhaps the clearest symbol of the new economic marginalisation of Com is the dormant port infrastructure. Its substantial concrete jetty, loading bays and facilities lie empty and crumbling in the sun. Visits by trading ships and cargo vessels are now rare events in marked contrast to the bustle of times past. Regional inter-island trade among neighbouring Indonesian settlements is also suspended and with it the networks of communication and exchange that formerly complemented larger-scale commercial shipping operations. The port's partially enclosed embayment now simply provides a spacious and sheltered mooring for a small number of local motorised outrigger *perahu* used for fishing expeditions and occasional travel along the coast. Mooted plans for rehabilitating the port and utilizing its strategic location as a supply and trading centre for the eastern region of East Timor have yet to come to fruition. No doubt this is influenced by the much-reduced economic activity across the region as a whole and the absence of any compelling economic reason for investing limited national funds in a distant port facility offering uncertain returns.

But if the prospects for increased maritime trade in Com remain subdued, and with it a more pronounced and contemporary sense of Com's peripheral position in relation to external centres of power and wealth, alternative economic opportunities may yet arise. In this regard, recent initiatives for attracting international tourism offer one possibility. Under current government planning programs, Com has been designated as a 'tourist precinct' (*zona pariwisata*), with its white sand beaches, fringing coral reefs and diverse marine environment considered a significant marketable attraction for promoting a new and vibrant local industry. At the present time such a vision appears optimistic, even utopian, with international recreational visitors and eco-tourists more notable by their absence. Nevertheless, the recent construction of the 'Com Beach Resort' with its seaside restaurant and luxury bungalows provides a striking demonstration of this potential,

albeit one that has generated significant debate and dissension among local residents. The focus of concern over the resort has raised a complex set of issues involving Konu Ratu land rights and demands for economic benefits from local residents. The case is an exemplary one for highlighting the twin themes that I have sought to bring into focus in this paper; namely, the fluctuating historical fortunes of Com as an entrepôt on the periphery, and the reproduction and transformation of tradition through engagement with external economic and political powers.

The Com Beach Resort, as its name implies, is a professionally engineered and finely furnished stone and timber hotel and restaurant/bar complex located on the Com beachfront. Largely completed by early 2002, the hotel was developed through a consortium of foreign and Dili-based Timorese investors to accommodate mainly Westerners and UN staff seeking fishing and recreational pursuits from their employment in the capital, Dili. At U.S.\$50 a night and U.S.\$3 for cold beer in the beachside cafe, the hotel is well beyond the capacity of local patronage, a feature underlined at night when the hotel generator floods the complex in light while the adjacent settlement of Com, little more than 50 m away, remains without electricity in darkness.<sup>58</sup>

The hotel development arose through a partnership between the investors and a Konu Ratu man who had fled the territory in 1975 and returned after 1999 to reclaim the rights to his father's fallowed land. Taking advantage of the legal uncertainties over land regulation during the UN period of interim administration (1999–2002), the agreement was concluded in the absence of any detailed community consultation.<sup>59</sup> Consequently and perhaps, unsurprisingly, this fomented local resentment coalescing around three key issues. Firstly, the rights of the Konu Ratu protagonist to claim personal ownership of the land were called into question. Secondly, the evident favouritism extended to family members of the Konu Ratu business affiliate for work opportunities on the building site. Thirdly, in fencing off the Hotel enclosure, the grounds of a former local school and health clinic were also incorporated. These public structures had been destroyed during the 1999 militia turmoil, but many people, including other members of the Konu Ratu clan group, believed that

<sup>58</sup> During 2004, further expansion and consolidation of the Hotel took place.

<sup>59</sup> Here I gloss a complex series of events and agreements that led to the development.

the land had been transferred legitimately to the former Indonesian government for the development of the facilities. They preferred to see them re-built and reinstated, and many saw the business arrangements of the returnee Konu Ratu man as an illegitimate attempt to enrich himself and his immediate family to the detriment of the wider community who had remained in Com and suffered during the oppressive Indonesian rule.

In the ensuing months, a series of community meetings and public discussions was convened in an attempt to resolve a complex series of issues over rights to land, work opportunities and the respective rights and responsibilities of the hotel owners and the local government's authority to manage local development. At the end of 2004, no clear or amicable solution had been achieved and the resolution may ultimately require a formal court judgement. For the present an uneasy accommodation to the arrangement appears likely. My Konu Ratu colleagues are critical of the attempt by their relative to appropriate individual ownership of, and benefit from, the land, which they view as part of their shared ancestral heritage. However, they acknowledge that collective rights in Konu Ratu land are divided among the constituent sibling family segments of the group and that bonds of family and common Ratu affiliation constrain attempts to declare public opposition. From my own perspective foraging for information and insight on the margins of this debate, the new development brought into some relief the tangled threads of tradition and topography that have always informed social adaptation to external economic opportunities in Com.

Whether the emergent trend in tourism results in a new round of prosperity for the small port is dependent on factors largely beyond the control of local residents. The trickle of European backpackers slowly finding their way to the picturesque seaside settlement, and the recent establishment of cheap homestay accommodation, suggests that local optimism may not be misplaced. If marginality is a concept rendered understandable only in relative and negotiated terms, Com's position as a peripheral coastal port on a remote island might be thought of as doubly constituted. Moreover, like the naturalising processes that characterise uplands marginality in Indonesia (Li 1999), Com's location as a lowland entrepôt 'on the margins' has also been subject to the vagaries and intrusive patterns of colonial powers in various guise. In reality, the nationalist struggle culminating in East Timorese independence is unlikely to reduce Com's incorporation within state processes of encompassment. Indeed, if anything, the

desire for increased integration and articulation within a growing national and trans-national economy reflects the general sentiment of the population, one in which they have always been prepared to engage.

In this respect, the unique topography of Com, its long history of creative engagement with external interests and the secure emplaced customary practices of its residents suggest that the settlement is well situated to negotiate beneficial outcomes from new economic opportunities that appear over the horizon. This extends to representatives of Konu Ratu, and the contemporary custodians of a rich littoral tradition, who must, as always, adapt to the discursive and insistent pressures of modernity and the territorializing imperatives of the state to negotiate space for collective customary and ritual authority over their ancestral domain. The extent to which they succeed in this objective remains an open question. As elsewhere across East Timor, the politics of the local turns on the often-contradictory tensions between reformist aspirations for change and cultural revivalist aspirations for reinstating old hierarchies.

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