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Aging in Timorese Exile: (Im)mobilities of Care and Intergenerational Relationships

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses transnational care and border regimes in the context of the East Timorese exile in rural Indonesia. Drawing from multi-sited ethnographic research, it explores the ways older people cope with family separation and life in exile, their aspirations, when and how transnational care becomes “on hold”, and how they deal with the impossibility of meeting intergenerational and cultural obligations. Analyzing care using the lens of “circulation”, the paper attends to the asymmetries entailed in intergenerational relationships as well as to how uneven power relations of border regimes shape transnational care exchanges. In the context of “aging in exile”, the paper underlines the importance of understanding older persons’ narratives as they are linked with the ambivalences of other family members across generations. The paper argues that the forms of immobility withholding or limiting caregiving can transcend physical boundaries. They can include the social and emotional borders conflict-divided communities build against one another over time. These “imaginary” borders require us to think about the additional asymmetries entailed in precarious familial relations and how this affects the multiple meanings of care in the context of contemporary border regimes and amid enduring legacies of violence.

KEYWORDS

Aging; exile; borders; care; Timor

Introduction

I remember everyday. . . left behind my grandchildren over there. Some stayed there. Some I brought with me here. Two of my children, they are now dead. . . O-oh. . . I am all alone.

I remember everyday. . . O-oh. . . my daughter and all her children. Living on their own. My memories can't touch them. My children, half in Timor, half in Indonesia, what can I do?

O-oh. . . I remember them. But what can I do? I am already in a different country. O-oh. . . I remember.¹

It was pouring with rain outside when Deastry and I visited Avó Marta Lopes at her home.² It was our second interview with her, and she spoke about her life before and after she was forced to flee from Timor-Leste to Indonesia,

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twenty years prior. *Avó* Marta sat with poise in the middle of the room. Sitting around her on the floor were her numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Halfway through her story, she suddenly took the audio recorder into her hands and broke into song, transforming the words above into lyrics of a melancholic melody. Her voice trembled. The room fell silent. Antonia, one of *Avó*'s adult grandchildren, looked at me and grinned apologetically. She said that her grandmother often sings like this when memories become "too much", "We tease her whenever she gets too nostalgic." When I asked why they would do that, she explained, "It is better for us to see her laugh than cry."

Avó Marta's song narrates her forced migration journey and ongoing experience of family separation. In the context of protracted displacement and restrictive border regimes, her story also reflects what "aging in exile" can look like. While scholarship on the multifaceted lives of forced migrants is rich and diverse, much less has been written about the predicaments of older people living in refugee camps, through displacement, and exile. The stories of older diasporic communities living in less-developed countries and beyond the Western European and North American contexts is scarcer still (Bolzman, 2014; Lamb & Hoffstaedter, 2018).

What could have *Avó* Marta meant by "My memories can't touch them," and what does this tell us when political borders are involved? What is in the expression of remembering others, when one perceives the option to return as impossible? Palpable in *Avó* Marta's lament is the sense of loss and how forced migration ruptures and alters familial bonds, and not only the self. How does such disruption manifest in the intergenerational relationships and care obligations between (aging) parents and (grand)children in the context of exile? These are some questions I address in this paper. At the heart of analysis are the narratives of older East Timorese women and men living in former refugee settlements in rural Indonesia from an intergenerational perspective.³

I draw on empirical data collected through long-term and multi-sited ethnographic research in both Indonesia and Timor-Leste. Following this introduction is a brief discussion of existing scholarship on "aging in exile" before turning to a focus on the (im)mobilities of care within and across borders. The paper then provides contextual background to the East Timorese exile in West Timor and on the research methodology.⁴ I then weave these sections with the experiences of East Timorese families on both sides of the borders through selected case illustrations. The paper explores the ways older persons cope with family separation and life in exile, their aspirations, when and how transnational care becomes "on hold" or is withheld, and how they deal with the impossibility of meeting intergenerational and cultural obligations. It argues that when thinking about transnational aging and care in the context of border regimes and exile, it is essential to think about borderlands beyond territorially bounded spaces, but also of those between social

groups. The analysis aims to gain a nuanced understanding of aging in exile and the multiple meanings of aging care alongside “hard” border regimes and amid enduring legacies of violence.

Aging in exile in the literature

Older people constitute the most vulnerable and often invisible groups of refugees and displaced persons. Their perspectives often elude policy interventions, resulting in their age-specific needs going unrecognized in the majority of humanitarian programmes and activities (Delgado et al., 2013). The experiences of older-age in forced migration contexts, be that of growing old in displacement or being forced to migrate in later life, have increasingly emerged as a research agenda in the social sciences, linking the phenomena of aging populations and global migration (Amrith, 2018; Bolzman, 2014; George & Ferraro, 2016; Lamb & Hoffstaedter, 2018). Nevertheless, this scholarship remains limited. There is a critical need to explore the aging dimension of forced migration, and particularly from the perspectives and subjectivities of older persons (Lamb & Hoffstaedter, 2018). In the context of my ethnographic research, talking to older people is especially valuable as a form of oral history, as well as to think about “care on hold” and the continuities in care across the life course and distance.

Existing literature on older refugees has primarily focused on those living in “Western” and more developed countries (Becker, 2002; Becker & Beyene, 1999; Bolzman, 2014; Lewis, 2009). Focusing on different geographical, historical, socio-political and cultural contexts, these studies reveal some of the challenges this group faces following a forced migration episode or after years of living in resettlement. These may include difficulties in adjusting to the various scales of life changes in the new place due to less adaptability compared to younger family members; loneliness resulting from language differences and loss of everyday social support networks; poverty and precarious livelihoods; (mental) health problems relating to poor living conditions and past traumatic experiences (Bolzman, 2014; Lamb & Hoffstaedter, 2018); and diminished or altered roles, such as no longer being a landholder or the loss of influence as “elders” within intergenerational family relations (Lewis, 2009). Feelings of loss can intensify when the initially temporary state of displacement becomes stretched to one of permanence (Bolzman, 2014).

Exile embodies a radical break with a person’s homeland. At the same time, it reconfigures people’s notions and forms of relatedness. Accordingly, findings of the studies above agree on the central role families (broadly defined) play in the lives of older persons in displacement. The studies also show how having a diasporic community in the new place, which shares the same history, ethnic identity, place of origin, and language, provide an essential network older people can resort to in times of sickness and hardship. Ilana Feldman

(2017) argues in the Palestinian case that living as a refugee over the long term often means having to die as a refugee. The costs of caring for aging bodies as well as the end of life, however, are beyond the financial capacity of humanitarian organizations (pp. 43–44). Thus, it is often through the family and diasporic community, rather than humanitarian providers, that older persons receive support for dealing with age-related illnesses and other predicaments (Lamb & Hoffstaedter, 2018). For older persons in exile, support networks such as these are important sites of caregiving. These relationships can facilitate continuities between the past and the present to occur and are fundamental in the process of “making place” and creating a sense of belonging (Bolzman, 2014; Lewis, 2009).

Care circulation and (im)mobilities within and across borders

Transnational families have become characteristic of ever-growing transnational mobility and virtual connection (Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Skrbiš, 2008). On the other hand, border regimes are set up to reinforce territorially bounded places. They restrict movements of persons and family reunions to a significant extent. As the access to mobility is profoundly influenced by disparities in power (Cresswell, 2010), border restrictions can be felt particularly harshly by displaced persons through the absence of travel documents, legal status, fear of persecution, and lack of economic means. The inability to access multiple mobilities, in turn, creates social exclusion and situations of immobility (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 210). How family members exchange care among each other in the context of “hard” borders, thus warrants exploration.

Scholars in the field of transnational families have shown us how distance and time do not necessarily sever the ties connecting family members spread across multiple nations (Baldassar et al., 2007; Chamberlain & Leydesdorff, 2004; Svašek, 2008). Central to sustaining this sense of belonging underlying family ties is the exchanging of care between its members (Baldassar & Merla, 2014, p. 7). Caregiving, as Baldassar and Merla (2014) argue, is an inherently reciprocal and asymmetrical process.⁵ Their concept of “care circulation” captures the way “care is given and returned at different times and to varying degrees across the life course, [thereby] *circulating* among family members over time and distance” (p. 7, emphasis in original). In the context of transnational families, care circulation describes the ways care connects people across borders through asymmetrical and yet reciprocal flows of caregiving (Baldassar & Merla, 2014, p. 8).

The model’s emphasis on the reciprocity and asymmetries of caregiving can help us trace “the movement of care and [monitor] the unevenness of its flows, including when it is lacking or abandoned” as it allows us to identify all actors involved in managing caring relationship (Baldassar & Merla, 2014, p. 11). In the framework of contemporary borders, examining these flows require us to

consider the “regimes of mobility” or the power relations governing people’s access to mobility and migration that are in place (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2012). When we further consider care circulation across national borders in the context of older persons’ mobilities, it is crucial to think of other forms of mobilities beyond the physical crossings of borders (Ciobanu & Hunter, 2017). Memory and imaginaries, as much as the use of ICTs, play an important role in the lives of older persons in migratory context. Particularly in the case for dispersed persons and refugees, Lisa Malkki (1992) has shown they use the memory of place to extend their homeland and to reimagine their new lived world.

Family ties within and across borders are not always harmonious. Neither can we assume that difficult and precarious relationships diminish the sense of kinship among its members, and close the opportunity for giving or receiving care. Previous work has shown, for example, how amid poor relations and legacies of mistrust, East Timorese families in exile engage in emotionally and materially taxing translocal practices aimed at the repair and strengthening of relationships after dividing conflict (Sakti, 2017). What is important to consider in this context, and what the care circulation concept helps clarify, is the uneven nature these relations are to one another. In analyzing the (im) mobilities of caregiving, we then must be “sensitive to the unevenness of reciprocal exchange, including the withholding and limiting of care” (Baldassar & Merla, 2014, p. 7), as well as to consider how boundaries between families and social groups can traverse physically bounded territories.

Researching “aging in exile” among older east timorese

The displacement and subsequent emplacement of the East Timorese in West Timor, Indonesia, unfolded within longer histories of violence and mobility. Timor-Leste, the eastern half of Timor Island, situated north of Australia, won its independence after centuries-long Portuguese colonization, which ended in 1974 but was shortly followed by 24-years of oppressive Indonesian occupation. Significant events transpired within the course of changing colonial powers. These include early anti-colonial resistance, a Japanese invasion between 1942 and 1945, a brief and bloody armed conflict between political parties in the mid-1970s, the independence struggle against the Indonesian forces, and, most prominent in recent social memory, the post-referendum violence in the last months of 1999. These events resulted in the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives and massive displacements from all thirteen districts of Timor-Leste at different points of time and places in people’s lives. The narratives of older East Timorese women and men I spoke with elucidate their multiple experiences of escape.

In researching “aging in exile”, my methodology combined ethnographic and oral history methods. This involved applying qualitative techniques such

as participant observation, long-term engagement at the local level, and semi-structured interviews that invited older East Timorese to talk about their lives in Timor-Leste prior to their displacement and narrate their everyday lives in Indonesia. The cases discussed in this paper are based on the range of interviews I collected over multiple stays in 2019. The paper is further informed by empirical data I collected during long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Timor-Leste and Indonesia between 2010 and 2015 for a past research project. Altogether, I have conducted 20 months of anthropological research among the East Timorese on both sides of the border. Interlocutors from my previous study, friends I made along the way, and fellow scholars working on these two regions helped open the door for me in identifying older East Timorese exiles in West Timor, and their families, to interview.⁶ Together with my research assistant, who herself is East Timorese, we worked closely with an East Timorese healthcare worker that oversaw a clinic for the elderly at one of the community health centers in the wider Kupang regency. He allowed us to join him in his bi-weekly outreach activities, visiting his older patients in their homes. This was how I met *Avó Marta*, introduced in the beginning of the paper, whom I visited regularly during my research stays.

By “older East Timorese”, I refer to the women and men who by the time of displacement were already in their older age or were approaching the age of 60 years and above upon the time of interview. This chronological age definition draws on how the nation-states of Indonesia and Timor-Leste understand “older age”. In everyday usage, however, East Timorese and Indonesian people understand the term also as a social, cultural and relational category. Interviews were largely conducted in the homes of the interlocutors and at a time that was convenient for them. Often, this meant talking with older interlocutors when other people were also present, in the late afternoons when families and neighbors typically gathered together, sitting beneath leafy trees and shared stories with one another after finishing a day’s work. The presence of family or other community members during interview situations was difficult to avoid but it also provided valuable data on intergenerational dynamics. These situations allowed me to observe and situate the older person’s voice in relation to other family members’ viewpoints, motivations and ambivalances. However, these settings required me to consistently reflect on not only my positionality as the researcher but also the asymmetries shaping intergenerational relationships and the resulting power dynamics, and how these influenced the older person’s narrative.

People’s displacement stories included the difficult time they spent in the jungle (*ai laran*, T.) in Timor-Leste as well as their crossing over the border and staying in refugee camps in West Timor. Other East Timorese sought asylum in Australia and Portugal upon the Indonesian invasion. Multiple experiences of displacement notwithstanding, my interlocutors would often emphasize their ongoing ties with the homeland in their narratives. They

would tell me about their extended or immediate family members living there, their return visits or longings thereof, they sought out information about the situation back home, which, would then inform their decision to return or settle. Rarely did older East Timorese talk about aspirations of migrating to other places other than to their homeland.

The East Timorese in West Timor today refers to the remaining population of those who fled the post-referendum violence in 1999. As official documents reveal, Indonesian security forces and their proxy militia groups displaced over 240,000 East Timorese to West Timor via land, air, and sea. This act was part of their retaliation for Timor-Leste's vote for independence from Indonesia. The militias were local East Timorese men that Indonesian security forces recruited, trained, and equipped. Militia groups became the "face" of the terrors that killed over 1,000 people and destroyed 90% of the country's infrastructure that year alone (CAVR Executive Summary, 2005). Upon their retreat to West Timor, they lived among the East Timorese refugee communities spread across Kupang, Belu and Malaka, North Central Timor (TTU), and South-Central Timor (TTS) regencies. At first, the East Timorese who fled to West Timor were given the status as refugees as stipulated by the UN definition. Following gradual repatriation of nearly 90% of the refugees (around 225,000 people) back to Timor-Leste, UNHCR announced the cessation of their status and all accompanying humanitarian aid by 31 December 2002. The number of East Timorese living in West Timor after this period, however, remains significant.⁷ They live in densely populated former refugee camps, relocation settlements or in urban settings alongside the host community. My interlocutors referred to themselves, as do the home and host communities, simultaneously as *pengungsi* (the Indonesian (I.) word for both refugee and displaced person), *warga baru* ("new citizen", I.) and *mantan pengungsi* (former refugees, I.) but invariably as "East Timorese" (cf. Damaledo, 2018).

Like the higher-level planners within the Indonesian security forces, former militias continue to enjoy impunity over past human rights abuses by remaining on the Indonesian side of the border. In so doing, they perpetuate the enmity and mistrust people in Timor-Leste hold against them. Communities back home and in the new settlement, however, often extend these sentiments to generalize the East Timorese population in West Timor as a whole, citing their continued exile as the consequence of political difference and for leaving past crimes unattended (Damaledo, 2018; Sakti, 2017). The experience or perception that one cannot return for their past political choice often defines people's understanding of exile. For example, 75-year-old Senhor Batista Gomes, who did not join militia activities in the past, described his exile experience as follows:

I see it this way; it is not that we do not want to return. What would we do when we are there? It's all politics, and we are already 'marked'.

The lives of older East Timorese are entangled in this complicated situation. They are either parents to or dependents of men who were involved in past serious crimes or served in the Indonesian security forces. They might be family members of or are themselves civil servants and benefit from Indonesian state pensions. They could also have been involved directly in past crimes, or were renowned supporters of the integration option with Indonesia, and are currently spending their later life in exile as a result. In addition to analyzing the different yet overlapping themes emerging from the interviews with older East Timorese exiles, I reflect on how their narratives are linked across generations. For this paper's focus, I do so by considering care obligations and intergenerational dynamics as being constituted by several voices and overlapping ambivalences (Palmberger, 2019).

Caring for and as aging parents in exile within and across borders

The narratives my interlocutors shared with me reveal the multiple meanings of caregiving and their implications in the context of exile and borders. The pressures of life in exile, particularly for older East Timorese, shaped the ways transnational families organize, prioritize, and fulfil care expectations that are central to their sense of belonging and identity. The following case illustrations were selected for their representativeness of the diverse experiences and situations of aging as an East Timorese exile in Indonesia, as well as different configurations of transnational caregiving, mobilities, and coping strategies that I observed during fieldwork. The cases explore how members of transnational families exchange aging care in the context of reduced mobility, border regimes, and enduring legacies of violence. They also seek to understand how older East Timorese deal with family separation and the impossibility of meeting cultural and intergenerational obligations.

The first case explored here is of 80-year-old *Avõ* Maria Ximenes. *Avõ* Maria was displaced from Viqueque, a district in the eastern part of Timor-Leste, to West Timor along with her family members. She was already a widow, a grandmother and over the age of 60 years at the time of displacement. Her daughter's family had lived with *Avõ* Maria in her ancestral village. When the violence broke out, they were forced onto trucks to join other residents of their village and later on to a vessel that brought them to Kupang. Twenty years on, *Avõ* Maria lived with her daughter's family, which consisted of her daughter's husband and their eight children and five grandchildren, in the same camp they were first displaced to in Noelbaki, located in the outskirts of Kupang.

She described everyday life in the former refugee camp as difficult and lacking a sense of community. “People who live here are from all over Timor-Leste, not just from one place. Neighbors either fight with each other or they gamble,” said one of *Avō Maria*’s granddaughters, with whom we were sitting, adding that her family would rather not have their grandmother socialize with her cohort for these reasons. *Avō Maria* pointed at a group of young children playing loudly on the busy road in front of where we were sitting. She said, “The kids get into fights with one another. When one kid is hit by another, their parents will get involved. Then, they end up fighting.” *Avō Maria*’s daughter, who at the time was preparing to retire from her job as a school teacher,⁸ joined in sharply, “Those kids keep us adults here busy! Every day we worry about them getting themselves in trouble!” When I asked *Avō Maria* about her everyday activities, she sighed, saying,

It is just like this. After getting up, I would eat with the family, sit with them and talk. I used to work on the gardens behind the bus terminal, but they won’t let me go anymore. I have a smaller garden to tend now just in front of the house, but it’s getting more difficult for me to jump over the gutter to reach it.

Another granddaughter who came to sit with us explained that her grandmother is now too old to work on a “proper” garden. She pointed at her walking stick, “What happens if she falls, and we are not there to help her?” She continued by saying that they would prefer *Avō Maria* to not even go to her smaller garden if they could stop her. “We would insist on working that garden and picking the vegetables to cook for her,” pointing out that even though they have taken over the cooking duties, *Avō Maria* would not let anyone wash her clothes for her.

In addition to her daughter, *Avō Maria* also has a son. He lives in Atambua, a town directly bordering Timor-Leste, 6 hours away by bus. His family is large too, similarly having eight children and numerous grandchildren. *Avō Maria*’s granddaughter joked that they had created a “village” for their grandmother to “make up” for those she could not be with back home. *Avō Maria*’s son was involved in past serious crimes in the 1999 violence, and believed that he would be arrested if he ever crossed the border to Timor-Leste. His situation propelled him and his sister to decide to settle permanently in Indonesia. Their ambivalences to return, reinforced by the fear of retribution and rejection from former neighbors back home, informed *Avō Maria*’s decision to also stay in West Timor.

Over time, *Avō Maria* has spoken of her desire to return, particularly since her family members in Timor-Leste have recently started contacting their family by phone or via social media (with the assistance of their younger family members) to talk with her. *Avō Maria*’s siblings were spending their later lives back home with their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. She longed to visit them and to care for her husband’s grave.

Her daughter and son, however, “held” her back – not allowing her to cross the border. They were afraid that if she did go back, she would enjoy her time back home “too much” and that family members in Timor-Leste would not let her go back to Indonesia. If this happened, or in the event she stayed until her death and was buried there, it would be difficult for her children to care for her (or her grave) from afar. Her son’s immobility and refusal to cross the border would not allow them.

Avō Maria’s case illustrates how everyday pressures of life in exile affect intergenerational care exchanges within and across borders. Caregiving here relates to the direct and practical support family members give to older relatives who are near the end of the life cycle, reflecting a continuity of ideas concerning older-age care as a moral and intergenerational obligation. *Avō Maria’s* family cared for her in a way that emphasized *physical* co-presence in caregiving activities. Caring might involve the taking over of one’s everyday duties, like cooking and cleaning, which, alas, may extend to restricting the older person’s agency and influence in decision-making processes. The family’s decision to settle in Indonesia, for example, resulted from considering the ambivalences experienced by those who had more influence within the family.

On the other hand, *Avō Maria’s* aspirations and desire to return, although discussed, was not prioritized. As her daughter alluded to, younger members of the family demanded more attention, especially in the context of living in a rough area in exile. While *Avō Maria* would often take the long and arduous bus ride to stay with her son in Atambua when she argued too much with her daughter, she said that she would never cross into Timor-Leste without her family’s permission. The lack of solidarity among the diasporic community, as she and her family members expressed about their neighborhood, however, further limited *Avō Maria’s* support network to just her immediate family.

While *Avō Maria’s* case illustrates how her reduced mobility resulted in her inability to cross borders and visit her homeland, the following case of *Avō Jacinta da Araujo* tells a different story. I met 60-year old *Avō Jacinta* in a new settlement in Atambua, where she owned the house she lived in but not the land. *Avō Jacinta* was a widow with three adult children. She had recently retired after over 30 years of working as a civil servant for the Indonesian government. Her husband held leading administrative positions in Timor-Leste during the Indonesian occupation before he passed away ten years prior. Although they had spent the last years of his life away from their homeland, they had managed to maintain kinship ties with members of their extended family in Timor-Leste through physical visits, telephone calls and messages, as well as through organizing care from afar. Furthermore, their eldest daughter had married and moved with her husband to Dili, the capital of Timor-Leste. For these reasons, when *Jacinta’s* husband died, they buried him in his ancestral village back home.

As both *Avõ* Jacinta and her husband had worked as civil servants, she received two pensions every month. She has the right to claim these pensions for as long as she lives and (upon her death) pass them on to one of their unmarried children. Her pensions support her daughter's family (her daughter's husband was going through long-term unemployment at the time of the interview) as well as her son, who had just graduated from university. They all live together in the house in Atambua. *Avõ* Jacinta's pensions were the primary family income and made her position within the family stronger. In my research, I observed how older people, particularly women, not only contributed to the family economy while in exile, they were often the primary source of income due to lack of employment opportunities for younger people. Not all my interlocutors received state pensions. For those who were farmers in Timor-Leste, no land ownership in the new place meant that they would have to work for local landowners for a small wage or split the harvest between them. Older people in Timorese exile often took on different types of hard labor when there was no land to work on, such as collecting firewood, crushing stones for gravel, and selling vegetables in the market.⁹

Returning to *Avõ* Jacinta's story, she had the financial capacity to make cross-border visits to her daughter's family in Dili. Her daughter also sent her money to pay for visa costs and the travel so that she can visit as often as possible. *Avõ* Jacinta enjoyed spending time with her family there, taking care of their everyday needs and providing help with childcare. However, her two other children in Indonesia would "pull" her back home through text messages and phone calls, and complained whenever they thought she was away for too long. That would be when she returned home to help care for them. Her frequent visits to Timor-Leste also allowed her to care for her husband's grave in their hometown as well as to take part in ancestral rituals along with extended family members to ensure their overall protection, safety and well-being. For East Timorese societies, care is not only exchanged between the living but also between the living and dead. Local beliefs hold that the everyday matters of the living are influenced by whether or not they take care of their ancestors' needs. When I asked about how people back home received her, knowing that her husband was a supporter of the Indonesian regime during the occupation, *Avõ* Jacinta said that people did not hold hard feelings toward her and treated her with respect. "I was a teacher for nearly all my life back home. People brought their children to me to teach. They would not reject me or exclude me," she reasoned.

Avõ Jacinta spoke of her later life in exile not as an experience marked by loneliness or sedentariness that is often assumed of older refugees. Instead, she described her everyday life as one that renders multilocality and gained mobility. Her narrative showed her stronger position in the asymmetries shaping intergenerational care exchanges within proximate as well as far away families. Thus, her mobility, as well as influence in family decision

making, did not become reduced in the way it did in *Avõ Maria*'s case above. Transnational care did not become "on hold" in her case. As an aging parent in exile, *Avõ Jacinta* finds herself being pulled by multiple places at the same time in the same way care circulates across transnational families. Her financial situation made it possible for her to access mobility and fulfil both her aspirations and expectations to care for family members as well as cultural obligations. *Avõ Jacinta*'s case furthermore shows the importance of both physical and virtual co-presence in the long-term project of social repair in providing access to the relationships connecting East Timorese families and communities (dis)connected by conflict across borders.

In the case of *Avõ Maria*, her immobilities to cross borders were further shaped by the uneven power relations of border regimes. Like many East Timorese I have spoken to, she as well as her family members in West Timor did not own Indonesian passports, which they could officially apply for but whose cost made them unaffordable at around 350,000 IDR¹⁰ per person. The lack of economic means also extended to having to pay visa costs to enter Timor-Leste, which at the time of our interview was 30 US Dollar per month. *Avõ Maria*'s granddaughter said that although their grandmother often talked about visiting home after 20 years, the financial hurdle was simply too high. She told me that *Avõ Maria*'s daughter and several grandchildren were planning a big trip that year to visit their grandfather's (*Maria*'s husband) grave. They have a cultural obligation to care for their dead and were planning to refurbish his grave. Providing that her daughter and grandchildren saved enough money for the trip, this could be *Avõ Maria*'s first visit back home after 20 years. Here, we can see a tension between the desire of the younger family members to realize *Maria*'s wishes to fulfil cultural obligations in Timor-Leste and their limited financial capacity.

Aging parents can also draw adult children who have spent extended periods away to return. This was the case for 60-year old *Joao Loki*, whom I met in one of Timor-Leste's border towns. *Joao* was a retired soldier of the Indonesian military and he had recently returned to his hometown after spending 20 years in Kupang. He described his return as "illegal", which meant that he did not go through formal border posts to show and register his (Indonesian) passport, and instead traveled through the traditional paths connecting the two areas. In order to collect his monthly military pensions, however, he must physically reside in Indonesia. As result, he traveled back and forth illegally while he looked for a more sustainable solution. His undocumented status was also the reason he was openly wary about my interest in interviewing him. *Joao*'s wife and six children (the eldest 26 and the youngest ten years old at the time) had moved back from Kupang to their hometown a couple of years ahead of him. They did so to prepare their new life back home by reestablishing relationships with extended family members and neighbors. His eldest daughter opened a small beauty parlor, and her younger

siblings assisted her. The income from her business added to Joao's pension, which was then used to support their entire family.

Since they were displaced to Kupang, Joao and his wife had always talked about one day returning to Timor-Leste after he retired. Deciding to return, however, was not easy and involved taking into consideration the needs, aspirations, and ambivalences of all family members. After all, Joao had served in the Indonesian army during the massive violence that broke out in 1999. Like other former Indonesian soldiers, he felt that the option to return was impossible for him. Joao was afraid of social and legal repercussions that might await him and his family should they return. Nevertheless, he decided to return in spite of his fear of rejection and legal repercussions, in order to care for his aging mother. He said about his decision:

The person who had birthed and nurtured me to life is now old. She is close to 100 years old. I need and want to be here for her to take care of her. It is my obligation as her eldest son, and I cannot see it any other way.

He and his wife are now rebuilding their family life back home under fear of being found out. Nevertheless, they took on everyday responsibilities while providing care for their children, grandchildren as well as their aging mother. Similar to *Avô Maria's* case, Joao's narrative placed great importance on the physical form of co-presence in caring for aging parents. Physical return visits are indeed unique in that they entail a multi-sensorial dimension, namely, "the ability to see, hear, smell and touch each other, and to interact emotionally within the same time/space frame, (...) which is irreplaceable by communication at a distance" (Svašek, 2008). However, while in *Avô Maria's* case, the border regimes, legacies of violence and family ambivalences resulted in her immobility to cross the border, Joao's case demonstrated a different way of circumventing these restrictions that allowed caregiving practices to flow across borders. It also showed a gendered aspect of being the eldest son and the intergenerational expectation this role carries. He felt compelled to return and take care of his aging mother at all cost.

Imagineries of return and place-making in later life

Return visits, however, were not always possible and required older persons in exile to find ways of reconstructing home to cope with family separation. Let us return to *Avô Marta's* story that opened this article. Her poignant song, sung in a shaky voice, expressed the losses and longings for far-away family members that characterize exile. *Avô Marta* experienced losses not only during the abrupt event of displacement but also in the deaths of her son and daughter in the new settlement. *Avô Marta* lived with her daughter-in-law, who was the widow to her son, and her numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Her precise age at the time was unknown, but her family and neighbors estimated that she was over 90 years old. Her son served in the Indonesian military and was also implicated in past serious crimes in Timor-Leste. For this reason they decided to settle in Indonesia.

Her son died ten years after living in displacement. Her daughter-in-law was her son's second wife, and they lived with children from her son's first and second marriages, along with some of their offspring's spouses and children. They shared two units of the houses the Indonesian military built for East Timorese families who chose to relocate to a new settlement in a village called Oefafi. In contrast to *Avõ* Maria's neighborhood in Noelbaki, which she described as lacking a sense of community as well as not having land ownership, the families living in Oefafi predominantly came from the same village, spoke the same language, and were able to purchase the land where their houses are built. *Avõ* Marta described her neighbors as akin to family members, and they helped one another in times of important life events, sickness, and hardships.

Avõ Marta's four other children lived in Timor-Leste. They have never visited each other since 1999. She said that her aging body would not endure the long travel home to the easternmost district of Los Palos, thus deciding to settle in Indonesia for good. Antonia, *Avõ* Marta's grandchild, who also spoke with us, said that it was only recently that the families on both sides of the borders, through the younger members, have found and contacted each other via Facebook. "We even made a video call, and they all wanted to see and talk with *Avõ* Marta," she said excitedly. Still, returning to Timor-Leste remains beyond the family's imagination. "The costs are too high, and we do not have the money. We also don't know if people would accept us back. They might still hold vengeance toward our father," Antonia added.

Avõ Marta said that she thinks about and remembers her family back home. However, she also worried what might happen to her grandchildren in the new settlement if she ever decided to leave and return to Timor-Leste. "Who will take care of the little ones here? I mustn't leave them," she said of her great-grandchildren. She spent her days planting and growing vegetables on a small patch of land in front of her house, which she shared with her grandchildren. She would sell the produce to her neighbors and cook for herself. Antonia said that *Avõ* Marta was protective of her garden, scolding young children in the neighborhood whenever they came close to it. Her daughter-in-law worked on other people's larger gardens for a low wage to sustain the family, while other family members contributed through different forms of hard and informal labor. They have also made the new place their home by "moving" their ancestral house to carry out rituals that are central in the maintenance of East Timorese identity and everyday cosmology. When memories of life in the homeland come flooding in, *Avõ* Marta would break into song in her native tongue. Her grandchildren and neighbors would sit with her and try to cheer her up as a form of providing emotional care.

In this case, we can see how a protracted stay in exile means that the events of family separation may occur at different points of time in a person's life course rather than resulting from one significant event. These may transpire through the gradual repatriation of extended family members or by "staying behind," as well as through deaths in the new place or the homeland. Memory and imagination play a crucial role in contexts of family separation, particularly for dispersed populations. Imaginaries in migration and forced immobility contexts are powerful because they allow emotional encounters between people and places without having to be in the same shared time and place or without being physically co-present. Thus, *Avõ Marta*, but also *Avõ Maria*, can care from afar, in spite of her immobility to cross national borders as well as lack of long-distance communication via ICTs. She does this through the act of remembering and thinking about loved ones far away. As my long-term research among the East Timorese has shown me, to say "I remember you" is to say "I care for you".

Concluding thoughts

In thinking about transnational care and contemporary borders, this paper explores the flows and withholding of care of the elderly in the context of East Timorese exile in rural Indonesia. In so doing, it hopes to contribute a nuanced understanding of the lesser studied phenomenon of aging in exile. The paper shows how analyzing care using the lens of "circulation" can direct our attention to not only the asymmetries entailed in intergenerational relationships but also to how uneven power relations of border regimes shape how (aging) parents and (grand)children exchange care (or not) across national borders. In the context of exile, I have shown how forms of immobility can withhold or limit caregiving *as* and *for* aging bodies, and can also transcend physical boundaries and the policies they generate. In some cases, family separation and the withholding of care resulted from and is perpetuated by the social and emotional boundaries conflict-divided communities build against one another over time. I argue that these "imaginary" borders require us to think about the additional asymmetries entailed in precarious familial relations and how this affects the multiple meanings of care of the elderly alongside "hard" border regimes.

In the context of East Timorese exile, the narratives of the older interlocutors cannot be isolated from the ambivalences experienced by the younger members of their family. Often, it is the past crimes family members committed back home that restricted older persons' mobility to cross national borders or to exchange transnational care. "Borders" in this sense point to not only physical territorially bounded places but also those separating social groups. For communities living in exile, the imaginaries attached to return visits are not constituted exclusively by nostalgia but also by the fear of

retribution and rejection. On the other hand, when we consider older persons' (im)mobilities, imaginaries and memories play a crucial role when physical border crossings are not an option. This form of mobility gives older people the chance to “care for” those afar in spite of the absence of physical and virtual communication. Nevertheless, the asymmetries of care exchanges might mean that the care received from far away family is unequal. The withholding of care can also result from the economic asymmetries related to uneven power relations of border regimes. For many older East Timorese exiles, particularly those who were not collecting pensions or were the main income providers for their families through hard and informal labor, costs related to return visits often presented a big hurdle to overcome. At the time of completing my fieldwork in late August 2019, both Indonesia and Timor-Leste reached a bilateral agreement to exempt Indonesian passport holders from visa costs upon entry to Timor-Leste for up to one month. This new development certainly warrants further research as to how it influences people's (im)mobilities across the Timorese borders, particularly for older persons.

My interlocutors' narratives revealed the priority people gave to the physical form of co-presence in caregiving activities. In their cases, this priority could mean that caregiving becomes restricted to circulate only within the proximate family or diasporic community in the new place. On the other hand, it could also mean that people become drawn to return to the homeland to fulfil intergenerational care obligations in spite of “hard” and “imaginary” border restrictions. When physical forms of co-presence as well as transnational mobility are impossible to achieve, older East Timorese in exile engaged in varying scales of “place-making”. This could mean through gardening and becoming active contributors to the family and diasporic community, among others. In coping with exile, family separation and mobility regimes, the East Timorese case shows how older persons and families employed strategies that involved intergenerational negotiations, taking of risks, and aspirations for engaging in reciprocal care.

Notes

1. Song in the original Tetum (T.) language: *Hau hanoin Loron-loron, Beioan Soe hela ba, balu iha neba, hau lori balu iha mai. Mate onan nain rua hau mesak deit. Ohhho hau oan feto h onia oan sira, tur mesak, hanoin la too. Oan sira iha rai Timor henoin hela hau halo nusa kuitadu. Hau hanoin oan balu iha neba, balu iha mai ba Indonesia. E . . . kotadu ba halo nusa, huuuuuu. oan sia ita hanoin ina hauk, oan nusa? Hau iha negara seluk onan e . . . kuitadu . . .* (translated from Tetum to Bahasa Indonesia by Deastray Yulita Taek).
2. I am indebted to Deastray Yulita Taek, who assisted me during my research stays in West Timor, Indonesia, particularly in February to April, June to July 2019, and February to March 2020. I have changed the names of my interlocutors here to protect their identity. *Avō* is a Portuguese-loaned word for grandmother in Tetum and is the respectful way to address older women.

3. The term “East Timorese” is the adjective used to refer to the people of Timor-Leste
4. The term “West Timor” refers to the western half of the Timor-Island, excluding Timor-Leste’s enclave of Oecussi. The term has no political or administrative meaning. The area of West Timor along with the islands of Alor, Rote, Sabu, Sumbawa and Flores comprise the Indonesian province of Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT). Areas of research included the regencies of Kupang, Atambua and Kefamenanu.
5. By “caregiving”, Baldassar and Merla refer to the broader sense of the word. This can include direct “hands-on” support through being physically co-present, as well as symbolic and emotional, economical, practical and child care, accommodation, and support through virtual forms of communication and co-present (Baldassar & Merla, 2014, p. 12).
6. Special appreciation must be expressed here to anthropologist Andrey Damaledo and Anato Moreira from CIS-Timor for their generous support during this research.
7. There is no reliable data as to the size of this group. In fact, a prominent feature about the East Timorese who remained in Indonesia after the cessation of their refugee status is the uncertainty surrounding their number. The most recent estimate based on census data collected by different agencies as well as thorough research shows that more than 88,000 East Timorese are currently living across West Timor (Damaledo, 2018, p. 16). Older East Timorese in West Timor are smaller in proportion compared to the rest of the population.
8. The official retirement age in Indonesia for civil servants is 58 years old, whereas the age termed as “old age” is 60 years old. Leading demographers in the field of aging in Indonesia, such as Aris Ananta and Evi Arifin, point to this gap as a lost opportunity for productivity (pers. comm. 15. 02. 2019).
9. My interlocutors’ understanding “older age” and “retirement” thus becomes related to their concept of physical capacity. People would say “I am old when I can no longer carry out (physical) work”.
10. 350,000 Indonesian Rupiah converts to approximately 25 US Dollars at the time of research. Many people I spoke with, furthermore, were also not in possession of all other documents they needed to apply for a passport. The Indonesian Rupiah was particularly weak at that time compared to the US Dollars Timor-Leste used as their currency.

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