Older Refugee Perspectives on Death, Remembrance, and Burial: The East Timorese in Indonesia

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Based on extensive ethnographic research, this article examines the perspectives and practices related to death, remembrance, and burial among older East Timorese people who have resettled in Indonesia. The study reveals how their heightened awareness of mortality shapes their experiences of forced migration and intergenerational relations in later life, providing new insights into the challenges faced by displaced communities in various socio-cultural contexts. Through a nuanced analysis of translocal practices related to death, the article shows how older refugees navigate competing familial and cultural expectations while grappling with the legacies of the Indonesian occupation. The article also highlights the ongoing processes of dealing with the past and aspirations for the future, as older East Timorese contemplate their future burial places. By exploring the intertwinements of ageing and death in a forced migration context, this study sheds light on how 'belonging' emerges as a significant issue and the importance of intergenerational relationships in such contexts.

Introduction

'I want to die back home', *Avó* (grandmother) Celia said in a gentle but deter-mined voice when I interviewed her in August 2019. We sat on a rickety bench underneath a large leafy tamarind tree, watching the sunset over a crowded re-location site in Atambua, Indonesia. Its deep orange hue reddened the dirt paths zigzagging between people's homes. Sitting across from us was Lisa, Avó Celia's adult granddaughter, who listened intently as her grandmother talked about later life and displacement. As the day drew to a close, Avó Celia spoke about a recent

injury she had suffered. It had made her think of the imminence of death and the predicaments this awareness brought forward.[1]

Like most other East Timorese in this area, Avó Celia and her family arrived as refugees in 1999 after fleeing East Timor, now formally known as Timor-Leste, following its vote for independence from Indonesia. The vote triggered local militias and the Indonesian security forces to retaliate with extreme violence. Avó Celia's family voted for continued integration and against independence, which is why they chose to remain in Indonesia. She explained to me how they came to live in the new settlement. Over two decades later, at the time this study took place, East Timorese like them continued to live in former refugee camps and relocation sites across Indonesian West Timor, with living conditions that have not improved, facing the prospect of growing older in exile.

Avó Celia's son, Lisa's father, was a former militia group member. These groups consisted of East Timorese men the Indonesian forces had recruited and backed prior to the referendum to intimidate local populations against voting for independence. These groups committed serious crimes against their fellow East Timorese, former neighbours and ancestral landscapes. To this day, the majority of them choose to live in Indonesia to avoid prosecution and social repercussion. Due to her son's involvement in the past violence, Avó Celia's family has not been able to return to Timor-Leste. Now in her 70s, Avó Celia expressed her wish to return and have her future burial place there. Lisa moved to sit next to her grandmother, and said,

> It is not an easy decision, given my father's past. People back home might not want him to visit in case one day Avó's gravesite is there. The family – both in the *kuan* [origin village] and here – will need to sit together and discuss what Avó wants and what is possible.

This article draws on the life stories of older East Timorese women and men who have resettled in West Timor. It examines their perspectives, experiences, and practices related to death, remembrance, and burial in the new settlement and place of origin. In other social and cultural contexts, death-related matters may not readily enter everyday discourse or policy considerations. This article will show, through ethnographic material, how these themes feature prominently in the way older East Timorese interlocutors express personhood in exile. On the one hand, it shows how older refugees navigate competing familial and cultural expectations while grappling with the legacies of the Indonesian occupation. On the other hand, the study also highlights the ongoing processes of dealing with the past and aspirations for the future, as older East Timorese people contemplate their future burial places.

In what follows, I provide a conceptual discussion linking ageing, death, and forced displacement. The article then delineates the methods, analysis, and researcher's positionality before discussing the empirical material. In deciding on death-related matters, including people's preferred future burial place, the

study's participants draw on past and present displacement experiences, collective memory, and hopes for the future.

Ageing and Dying Away from Home: Conceptual Perspectives

Ageing and dying are intertwined issues, albeit ones that have not always been researched alongside each other (Gott and Ingleton 2011). Mainly overlooked is the question of how people who were forced to migrate in later life or those who are growing older in exile view their homeland and the likelihood of dying away from it (Becker 2002; Hunter and Ammann 2016; Feldman 2017; Bird 2019). In forced displacement contexts, people leave without choice, often leaving loved ones behind and staying in exile for a prolonged time. Displaced people can experience the longevity of displacement until the end of their lifetime (Feldman 2018; Sakti and Amrith 2022). This state of protractedness raises the question of how older adults and their families think about and plan for death in displacement settings and the meanings behind death-related practices and decisions.

As people grow older, ageing bodies and the surfacing of illnesses heighten the awareness of death. For forcibly displaced older people, these circumstances intermingle with memories and cultural practices associated with the previous home (Gunaratnam 2013). Their past and present displacement experiences affect how they think about and prepare for death (Becker 2002), as do the health and end-of-life care frameworks that are made available (or not) to them. Alistair Hunter and Eva Soom Ammann have argued that 'the end of life is a critical juncture in migration and settlement processes' that may include very different and incompatible notions of a 'good death' or 'good dying' between the perspectives of older displaced persons and their relatives and those ideals of care professionals in the new place of residence (2016, pp. 96–97). Similarly, notions of a 'bad death' may accompany persons' migration experiences.

Death, may that occur within a migratory context or not, is not an isolated event. It is at once a physiological, social, and cultural phenomenon (Hertz 1960). When death occurs, people usually follow culturally determined mortuary rituals to ease the deceased out of this world and safely settle into the next and into memory (Robben 2017). These rituals vary according to historical, cultural, and social factors and, in migratory contexts, bring not only to the fore existential questions related to values, beliefs, and yearnings, but also pragmatic ones, such as where to bury the deceased and the consequences that may arise from that decision for their offspring.

The social aspects of death create obligations for relatives of the deceased. Different members of the same family, and especially in migratory contexts, may have different understandings of where they believe and wish the final resting place for the deceased should be. As the literature on transnational families has demonstrated, tension may arise between older parents who want to die and be buried 'back home' and their children, who may have a different understanding as to where that 'home' is to them (Baldassar *et al.* 2007; Zontini 2015; Nesteruk 2018; Pérez Murcia 2022). Related to this predicament is the familial obligation to

keep the deceased's memory alive through caring for their graves long after they die. Thus, while forced displacement may radically remove a person from their homeland, they can remain devoted to the memory and obligations towards their deceased loved ones who are buried in the place of origin. Likewise, memory and responsibilities to the dead can propel people to return to significant sites through physical visits or imagination. The dead can continue to 'demand the attention of, and action by, the living', requiring their relatives never forget or neglect them (Kent and Feijó 2020a, p. 16). In this sense, displacement complicates not only the ways in which people anticipate death and burial, but also their caring practices for the dead in relation to national borders (see Bird 2019).

As in other parts of the world, the dead remain potent actors in Southeast Asia and in societies grappling with the legacies of colonial rule and mass conflict, especially where animist ontologies persist (Chambert-Loir and Reid 2002; Kwon 2006; Kent and Feijó 2020a). Among East Timorese societies, the dead is thought to influence the everyday lives of the living. Following mortuary rituals, they are generally transformed into ancestral spirits with powers that can be ben-evolent, protective, and malevolent. Thus, people observe ancestral ceremonies with particular care. When families fail to meet their obligations, the dead can unleash misfortunes such as illness, economic hardship, and even death (Bovensiepen 2014; Kent and Feijó 2020a). Caring for the dead through com-memorative practices, thus, involves not only the desire to fulfil cultural obliga-tions, but also concerns for personal and familial well-being.

Commemorative practices for the dead play a crucial role in highlighting the significance of social or collective memory. Paul Connerton's (1989) landmark book, *How Societies Remember*, shows the connections between these practices and group identity. He argues that the social memory of a group is expressed and sustained not only through discursive or narrative practice, but also through the bodily practices of remembering. Relevant to this article, the themes of death and dying away from home among the East Timorese in Indonesia appear not only exclusively in what people articulate through words, but also ritual performance, cross-border visits, idioms of distress, and bodily symptoms. A person's sense of personhood is not only tied to their individuality but also positioned within a web of kinship ties and reciprocal relations between the dead, the living, and the social and cultural worlds in which they live. For many of the people with whom I have worked, being an East Timorese person entails the life-long commitment to care for kin relations and the dead.

Yet, geographical distance and the legacies of violence create challenges to how older persons and their families can fulfil these commitments. Gay Becker (2002) in his study on dying away from home among Cambodian refugees and migrants from the Philippines in the USA highlights the role of memory work and imagin-ation in older age and migratory contexts. He argues that 'for transmigrants, memory work may be a powerful tool in reconciling the rupture of leaving home, in decisions to return, and in coming to terms with death' (2002, p. 83). Memory here is not merely reproduced. People attach meanings to memory that

are, in turn, always related to contemporary situations and embedded in broader political contexts.

Memory work in transnational settings highlights the usefulness of Arjun Appadurai's concept of 'locality' as a primarily relational and contextual web of relationships, rather than something fixed in space or place (Appadurai 1996, p. 178). This concept, and 'translocality' specifically, helps us understand that territorial place-based identities and affiliations do not diminish in the process of (forced) migration. Migrants can extend certain 'localities' through their place-making efforts, which are expressed in their material, affective, and social practices (Brickell and Datta 2011). For older East Timorese adults and their children, who were forced to migrate and resettle in Indonesia, the concept of translocality directs us to consider older people's multiple identities, belongings, and attachments to places that people may come to hold during prolonged displacement (Thu 2020).

Research with Older People and on Death-Related Matters

The findings presented in this article are part of a broader study of the ageing experiences of older people living in displacement contexts, with a focus on reset-tled older East Timorese in Indonesia. As an anthropologist, ethnographic methods constituted the core of my approach to researching older East Timorese people's ageing experiences. This process involved applying qualitative techniques such as participant observation, long-term engagement at the local level, and semi-structured interviews that invited interlocutors to talk about their lives in Timor-Leste before displacement and their everyday lives in Indonesia. To further ground my research on local knowledge and gain access to the population, I worked with an East Timorese research assistant who had partly grown up in one of the relocation sites. Together, we discussed and adapted the interview questions. I formulated these in an open-ended style that corresponded broadly to some interest themes, such as family life, relationship with people in the place of origin, and how older people maintain kinship and cultural ties across state borders.

With my research assistant, I conducted home visits to various East Timorese settlements across West Timor. I participated in community activities, such as weddings, religious celebrations, and healthcare outreach programmes targeted at older populations. While I was the lead interviewer, my research assistant and I conducted the interviews together in an informal and conversational style. Other family members and neighbours were often present, and they would join the conversations (see Sakti 2020). In asking interlocutors for consent, I would describe the study, interview questions, and how I planned to handle their responses. I would also ensure that people can refuse participation and respect their decision.

In most cases, interviews were possible only after my second visit to the inter-locutor's home and during each visit, I repeated the process of asking for consent. We conducted the interviews in Bahasa Indonesia and Tetum, and the research

assistant gave translations for local dialects. After field visits and interviews, we evaluated and learned from the day's encounters and reflected on how our biographies and other people's presence (especially family) might have impacted interlocutors' responses and how these, in turn, affected ours.

Concrete practices of reflexivity for me included keeping a journal containing both fieldwork observations and reflections on how my positionality may have elicited certain responses from others. One potential issue included being an Indonesian female researcher based in Europe. I was consistently aware of how my biography in relation to the East Timorese occupation history could trigger sensitive memories. Thus, I needed to base the study on a deep understanding of the social, cultural, political, and historical contexts surrounding people's lives. Furthermore, my relatively younger age compared to most interlocutors also meant that I had to keep my biases in check. For instance, I appreciated that studying 'ageing' does not mean it is a study 'only' about old age; older people have other concerns besides their advanced age (Kavedžija 2019). This awareness made me attentive to the relational and aspirational dimensions of older people's lives, and I sought to explore these in my interactions with interlocutors. Additionally, my research assistant also communicated her biases from her proximity to the population. She was aware of how common it was to dismiss older people's views or ability to form opinions among East Timorese societies. I documented these responses and joint reflections to make sense of the phenomenon under study (Stodulka *et al.* 2019).

The cases discussed in this article draw on the range of interviews I collected over multiple stays between 2019 and 2020 (40 interviews in total). It further draws on empirical data I collected during long-term ethnographic fieldwork in these regions since 2010 on a different but related topic, namely on the enduring legacies of the Indonesian military occupation of Timor-Leste. Altogether, I have conducted 24 months of anthropological research among the East Timorese on both sides of the border. For this research, I used purposive sampling to reach a group of diverse participants in their ethnolinguistic and economic backgrounds, ages, and gender. Death-related themes often emerged organically in the interviews as mortuary practices are significant in East Timorese customary beliefs. Other times, this theme did not emerge organically. In these situations, I appreciated the topic's sensitivity. I would not prompt with a carefully formulated question on the matter unless I have gained enough trust within the interview setting.

Together with my research assistant, I transcribed the 40 recorded interviews and translated them from their original languages to Bahasa Indonesia. I then employed qualitative data analysis software (NVivo12) to identify the common themes, or nodes, that ran through the interviews. The node of death, remembrance, and burial was prominent and elicited diverse responses from the interlocutors. This article analyses these responses and situates them further in the broader scholarship of death and dying in migratory contexts and the specificity of the East Timorese case. To present the ethnographic material coherently, I have selected relevant ethnographic encounters, reflections based on fieldwork notes

and interview quotes, which I translated from the verbatim transcriptions to English.

The East Timorese Displacement Context

A former Portuguese colony for 450 years, Timor-Leste has experienced multiple waves of forced displacement due to internal conflict, consecutive foreign occupation, natural disasters, and colonial state directives. The most violent waves of displacement and conflict-related deaths occurred during the Indonesian military's invasion of the territory in 1975 and the subsequent 24 years of occupation. On 7 December 1975, a little over a week after the region declared independence, the Indonesian military invaded Timor-Leste via air, land, and sea, killing thousands of civilians in its capital city, Dili. As the Indonesian troops advanced to the countryside, tens of thousands of people fled to the mountain interiors with Fretilin, the pro-independence movement, who led the resistance throughout the occupation (CAVR Executive Summary 2005, p. 12). During the following years, Fretilin and its armed forces put up intense opposition against the Indonesian military. The Indonesian army deployed 'encirclement and annihilation' campaigns that involved heavy aerial and naval bombing and destruction of food crops and livestock, forcibly relocating local populations into heavily guarded 'strategic camps' (Taylor 1999, p. 86). Throughout the occupation, the Indonesian forces continued suppressing the resistance by torturing, imprisoning, disappearing, or executing East Timorese people who were suspected of involvement with Fretilin or supporting the opposition.

Older East Timorese interlocutors spoke of spending months and years hiding in the mountain interiors, while others aided the troops with their military operations instead of fleeing. However, heavy military activities meant that they had to witness many violent deaths. Harsh living conditions in the mountain interiors and the destruction of food crops caused starvation and outbreaks of illnesses, leading people to bear witness to their family members dying, including children, causing them to surrender to the occupying forces. Official documents found that this dark period resulted in a death toll of 102,800–183,000 civilians (CAVR Executive Summary 2005). The legacies of these deaths remain troubling, specifically when the whereabouts of the dead bodies are unknown or not reclaimed (Kent and Feijó 2020b).

Timor-Leste's occupation ended after the fall of Indonesia's authoritarian president, Suharto, in 1998. His successor, B.J. Habibie, unexpectedly announced a referendum for the East Timorese people. The two options offered were: (1) greater autonomy within Indonesia or (2) self-determination (independence from Indonesia). When the result was announced on 4 September 1999 in favour of independence (78.5 per cent), they retaliated with widespread violence, destroying 90 per cent of the territory's infrastructure and forcibly displacing people into West Timor by forcing them over the border on trucks and boats (ICG 2011).

The terror campaign by the Indonesian armed forces and their East Timorese militia groups before, during, and after Timor-Leste's independence referendum

in 1999 resulted in the deaths of at least 1,200 civilians in that year alone. The violence was brutal; significant incidents of mass killings were documented across the territory and took place before the eyes of the world (Tanter *et al*. 2006). Older interlocutors often spoke of the deaths they witnessed at that time as a reason for staying in West Timor. Over 20 years after the violence, some interlocutors feared that people 'were still killing each other' in Timor-Leste and preferred never to return. In the years after the mass displacement in 1999, the UNHCR ended the refugee status for East Timorese on 31 December 2002 after they facilitated most refugees' safe return. Domestically, their refugee (*pengungsi* in the Indonesian language) status continued until 2005. By then, those who chose to remain in Indonesia attained national identity and locally dubbed as 'new citizens' (Damaledo 2018).

Today, approximately 88,000 East Timorese live in West Timor (Damaledo 2018, p. 16). Their settlements vary in their characteristics, origins, ethnolinguistic composition, and population size. Some live in the same refugee camps as when they first arrived, while others have relocated to new settlements. These settlements consist of low-cost housing the government built without local consultation, resulting in segregated dwellings and a lack of meaningful interaction between the refugees and the local population. With their domestic refugee status revoked, the Indonesian government stopped humanitarian aid. Older interlocutors often invoked the absence of assistance when describing the chronic poverty, substandard living conditions, and neglect they continuously experience despite becoming Indonesian citizens.

Perceptions and Preparations Related to Death and Burial

The sense that death could happen at any time was something my interlocutors also connected with their living conditions in displacement in West Timor. To illustrate this point, let me return to Avó Celia, whose story opened this article. At the relocation site where we were, steep and narrow rocky paths connected the dozens of houses built on a rugged plot of land nearby a marketplace in Atambua, West Timor. Two months before the interview, Avó Celia had sprained her ankle while walking downhill, transporting a heavy sack of broken stones on her back to sell at the market. Her sprained ankle took time to heal, and Avó Celia began to suffer from other bodily pain, forcing her to rest at home. As she recounted this period, Avó Celia complained about her lost income from being unable to work. Lisa shook her head in response to her grandmother's comments, and said,

> We were worried about her because she was in a lot of pain and her age was already high. Avó said she worried about money, but now that she is older, she has to take better care of herself.

Despite her recent injury, Avó Celia looked in high spirits. I asked how her foot was now doing, to which she responded ironically,

> It is better. But older people like me must be more careful when walking up and down these slippery paths. Today, I sprained an ankle. Tomorrow I can die from a fall.

Accidents like this happened regularly in these sites, where older people relied on physical labour for their livelihoods. Avó Celia did not seek medical attention because, as she explained, the nearest community health centre would require them to take a long journey on a motorbike, which family members feared might worsen her condition. Depending on the availability of health care services where they live, East Timorese interlocutors dealt with their illnesses or those of others differently. Long-term effects of displacement, such as poverty and social inequality, impact end-of-life care for older people. Central to this is family and community support.

In what follows, I discuss the thematic analysis of older interlocutors' responses to death and mortuary practices. Chief among these include how East Timorese communities care for the dead through commemorative rituals across borders, how death facilitated people's aspirations and preparation for a final return, and the older adults' desires to reconcile unresolved issues in the past through deciding burial locations in the future. Cross-cutting these themes is the importance older East Timorese interlocutors place on familial well-being and the sense of belonging to multiple sites.

Caring for the Dead: Cross-Border Remembrance Practices

East Timorese interlocutors spoke with reverence about their ancestors. They carefully observed rituals and lit candles on ancestral gravesites, landscapes, and from the new settlement. Older women living in border towns often walked through informal paths at the risk of being caught by the border patrol to attend ancestral ceremonies in their places of origin. Pensioners of the Indonesian civil service had the financial resource to cross the border legally using an Indonesian passport. One older East Timorese woman, Lidia, recounted how she and her husband, both pension recipients and not involved in past serious crimes, would regularly travel to Timor-Leste to visit family and ancestors' graves. Because of their regular return visits, she was able to bury her husband and perform mortuary rituals there when he passed away.

> V: And what did you do there when you visited?
> L: This and that. We stayed with our family in Dili, and played with the grandkids. Then, we spent time in our [origin] village. We attended and contributed whenever there was *adat* [i.e. ancestral ceremonies]. Our former neighbours were all very welcoming. No one gave us trouble because we live here. When my husband died, we had no trouble burying him there.
> V: Why do you think that was?
> L: We always went back to visit and never ended our relations with former neighbours. We were always nice to them, and, as a result, they welcomed us back. My future burial place will be next to my husband when I die.

But not everyone can or will return. Those who received no pensions lacked the financial resources to travel. Those who went through traumatic experiences during the conflict refused to return out of fear. And those involved in perpetrating past crimes feared punishment should they cross the border. During my earlier research stays, interlocutors told me how they would send food and other material to their families illegally through the border. During this research period, they said that this was no longer possible. Stricter border regulations impacted the way East Timorese in West Timor could or could not participate in death rituals at their place of origin. The group conversation below between two widows, Eleonora and Ignatia, and the former's granddaughter, discuss this issue:

> E: We can't just cross the border through the back way [informal paths] anymore. We could get arrested.
> V: What if there is a death in the family in Timor-Leste?
> I: If we have a passport and some money, we can go. If we don't, then we can't.
> E: Yes, nowadays we also have to show our passports. We can go for one week and then come back.
> I: I'm afraid to [cross borders]
> E: If you show an Indonesian residency permit (*kartu tanda penduduk* or KTP) at the borders and say that you need to attend a death ceremony, sometimes they let you in. But they only give you three days before returning to the border.
> CE (granddaughter of E): If you show the KTP, you can stay for three days. One day travelling, one day burial, and one day travelling back.
> E: When my older brother died, I had to go [to Timor-Leste] because it was not an option for me not to go.

Stringent border regulations coupled with economic hardship hindered older interlocutors' wishes to visit their place of origin and ancestral gravesites. Long-distance and translocal mortuary practices, thus, played an important role in East Timorese people's lives in the new residences.

> I: If we cannot go back home, we light candles for the dead here. We say their name and the names of our ancestors (*Abo*) as we light the candles. They will hear us call their names and understand why we could not come in person. We must remember them this way.
> E: We light the candles at Haliwen [a refugee camp location]. There is a large cross there where we could light the candles. Other East Timorese *pengungsi* also remember their faraway loved ones there.
> V: When do you go to remember the dead there?
> E: We go on 2 November [All Souls' Day] and the deceased's death anniversary. We also go when someone in the family is sick, we go and give offerings to the ancestor to give healing.

This section delineated how people's circumstances in the present and familial and cultural obligations shape how older people think about and act on death-related matters. In doing so, it highlights the interplay of the past, present, and future in

people's approach to death, remembrance, and burial within and across re-established state borders, which the following section further discusses.

Death as Facilitating a Return to the Ancestral Land

> The borders, turning points and transitions in transnational dying feature a familiar human terrain: love, revelation, family feuds, reparation, disappointment, legacy, inheritance and imperfect endings (Gunaratnam 2013, p. 9).

For East Timorese societies, death is a profoundly social and cultural matter. It entails the notion of returning and, thus, belonging to the land. When a person dies in exile, the deceased's extended family in the new settlement and origin place must negotiate decisions concerning the burial place. They must consider long-term implications for their members, such as whether or not those living in Indonesia could regularly visit the grave and care for the dead. Likewise, a family member's death can also be a catalyst for a return for those who have spent a prolonged time in exile. For instance, Antonio, a 65-year-old widower, first visited his place of origin in Timor-Leste after spending nearly two decades in Kupang, Indonesia.

> A: The first time I went there, I only had a travel permit. I didn't have a passport yet because, after the death [of a family member], everything [the bureaucracy] had to move quickly so that we could transport the deceased across the border. As we approached the border, my heart was beating fast. I saw East Timorese men in soldier uniforms. The uniforms scared me, although I knew that family members from the village were coming to pick us up at the border. We crossed the border and had to wait. The officers checked our papers, and once they cleared everything, we had to move the coffin from the Indonesian vehicle that brought us to the border to the East Timorese ambulance.
> V: How was your impression of returning to Timor-Leste after so many years?
> A: I was so scared. I didn't speak a word at the border until my family picked us up. I only opened my mouth to say that we were there to transport a dead body for burial. We left right away after the family picked us up. I noticed the road from the border to Dili was newly asphalted, but the smooth road didn't last long. It had lots of potholes; the coffin began to squeak and move around. It was a long journey. We entered the border at 9 AM, arrived in Dili at 3 PM and later at our village at 10 PM. When I got off the car, I looked around at my surroundings. The coconut trees weren't as tall as I had remembered them. When they told us to get out of the car, I kept one hand on the door frame. I wanted to be sure they didn't just drop us off at a random place. But then familiar faces began to appear. They were the family I had not seen for over two decades, greeting us from inside their homes.

While the death of a family member facilitated Antonio's first visit back to Timor-Leste, fear of rejection accompanied his journey. Avó Celia and Lisa shared similar concerns, as did other research interlocutors whose spouses, fathers, and sons were involved in past serious crimes. 'Circulating stories' among the East

Timorese diasporas about people's bad experiences of return (Askland 2014) or failed attempts at burying a deceased person's body at the ancestral land further feed into people's fears of returning. During a group interview at Tuapukan camp in Kupang, Frida, a 60-year-old East Timorese woman originally from Lospalos, told us her neighbour's story of a failed attempt of burial back home:

> F: Americo and his family here brought their cousin's dead body to their village, but the people there rejected it. They did not want to have him buried in their land.
> V: Why was that?
> F: I'm not sure. Maybe Americo's family [in exile] never attended any *adat* or funerals of family members there. That is perhaps why they rejected the body, or it could be because they still hold vengeance against him over the past. We don't know, but they had to bury him in his wife's family's village.
> Lucia [L]: They should have called the family in Timor-Leste before they left [to transport the body], right?
> Antonio [A]: Yes, that's how it is usually done. That's why, since my wife's funeral back home in Timor-Leste, I began to visit more often with a passport. Then, I started attending ceremonies and funerals of people in my hometown. I do that so that when my time comes, people will accept my dead body to bury there.

Antonio and Lucia, who were part of this interaction, had heard about the story of the rejected body. They talked about it to emphasize the significance of maintaining good kinship ties. Unlike Antonio, Lucia and Frida had never returned to their origin places and did not plan to return out of fear. Their spouses have long died and were buried in the new settlement, where they would also like to be laid to rest one day.

Significance of Family Presence for End-of-Life Care in the New Settlement

Atambua's lively marketplace was not too far from where Avó Celia lived. Tarpaulin tents that sheltered East Timorese refugees had filled the market's side-roads during the early displacement years. Only a few makeshift homes now stood as a reminder of that time. At one of the homes, two women of advanced older age lived together. The living space they shared was dark with little sunlight. The metal sheet walls and roof made the room too warm in the afternoons. Additionally, there was no lavatory, air and rainwater came through the gaps between the weak structure. During the day, Maria, one of the woman's daughters who was in her early 50s at the time of the interview and also the daughter-in-law of the second woman, would come to care for them. Maria would sometimes stay over for a couple of nights before returning to the house she shared with the rest of her family, which was on a hill nearby the market. After cooking for her two mothers, Maria would sit by the door and work on her cloth weaving. Without stopping her work and with a lightness in narrating, she said,

> The two grandmothers didn't want to move with us to the new place because we live on a hill. They are already very old. One has gone blind and bedridden, and the other

is also often ill. I help them with toileting too. My mother was still strong, breaking stones to sell at the market, until a few months ago when she fell and broke her ankle. The government doesn't help older people like them, even when they are refugees and don't have much time to live. But the nuns from the Church come every month and rice and cooking oil.

Asked whether the two grandmothers had expressed the desire to return to their home country, Maria let out a chuckle and said,

My husband, *aiiy*. He didn't know what he got himself into during the war [the 1999 conflict]. People call him a militia. But he didn't know at that time. We can't go home because people say he is militia. People were beating and killing each other back then. No, the two grandmothers don't want to return unless the entire family can go. They said they would stay with us here because we are here.

While most research participants were around 60 years old at the time of research, they often did not describe themselves as 'old'. They were still actively working in the fields, caring for family members, and generally did not feel old. For them, 'older age' refers to when people exclusively receive old-age care from other family members, like the two grandmothers above. The grandmothers' choice to stay rather than return to Timor-Leste also reveals what it means to age well in this cultural context, namely to be surrounded and cared for by family until one's death. Local beliefs consider dying within the house and family proximity a 'good death'.

Temporary Graves and 'Returning to the Land'

In a study of how an East Timorese society was rebuilding their lives in the aftermath of forced displacement and the Indonesian occupation in the central highlands of Timor-Leste, anthropologist Judith Bovensiepen (2015) found that people were more concerned about remembering the dead and reconnecting with the ancestral land rather than talking about their sufferings in the past. She points out that the two concerns are intricately related since people believe they become part of the land when they die. In the process of 'returning to the land', displacement and resettlement experiences can shift and transform older persons' political loyalty and ideas about the land to which one belongs (c.f. Damaledo 2020).

Becker has shown, in the case of Cambodian refugees in the USA, that older respondents reported the need to heal cataclysmic ruptures that occurred in the past to experience a sense of order and integration in their lives as they approached death. As the above sections have demonstrated, the need to resolve past disruptions was also evident in older East Timorese interlocutors' narratives and caring practices for family and ancestors. Religious faith also played an essential role in shaping their perspectives on death. One of the most senior research participants,

Marta, a 90-year-old woman, said that practising her Catholic beliefs had become more important as she aged. 'I follow what the bible says and not only the words of the ancestors', she said. Her perspective on mortality implied a religious-inspired (rather than a place-based) understanding of returning to the land, namely that 'we are dust, and to dust, we shall return.'

Like Marta, 80-year-old Juliana's perspective of future burial places was not strictly tied to the ancestral land. When we spoke on this issue, the question of where she planned hers had a clear answer: wherever her family was.

> I don't want to make things difficult for them. If they can't go to Timor-Leste anymore, why do I have to insist on returning myself? I don't want to put them in harm's way. Our lives are connected to the ancestors, but also to God and our family. For me, where my family lives is where I shall be.

Older East Timorese interlocutors confront the prospect of dying away from the place of origin in different ways but always in sync with the circumstances of their immediate family members. Decisions related to burial locations also demonstrate how people expressed political belonging. Andrey Damaledo (2020) argues that those who fought for and supported the Indonesian regime in Timor-Leste actively choose to be buried in the new settlement as their ultimate expression of belonging to Indonesia. In post-conflict Timor-Leste, these decisions can change over time. When interlocutors showed me their family members' graves, often located next to or behind their homes, they would explain that the grave was temporary. This was because people held on to the hope of one day moving the grave to Timor-Leste. A family's aspirations to move the bones of deceased loved ones depend on their financial readiness. Some wait to move several graves simultaneously to save costs, while others wait for reconciliation at the community level. As one former East Timorese member of the Indonesian military explained to me from his home in Naibonat camp in Kupang:

> I will be buried wherever I die. Of course, I understand that this is part of the consequence of choosing to be an Indonesian citizen. It was my life story that I came to fight for national unity. However, one day, when we achieve true reconciliation in Timor-Leste, meaning that former neighbours will accept people like me to return and be buried there, my family should not forget about me. They should come and move my bones across the border and bury them back home. They should not forget about me.

Political loyalty informs older persons' perspectives on and preparations for death, but this does not stop people from holding on to the hope of returning to their origin places if they so wish. The ageing process, be that of their own experience of growing older or that of their former neighbours and family in Timor-Leste, was also reported by older East Timorese as a positive contributing factor to resolving past disputes. 'We are all older now; we can't bring harm to each other anymore', as Antonio, who in the earlier sections spoke about return visits as a way of preparing a future burial place in the origin village. In approaching the end of life and death-related matters, older East Timorese interlocutors

confront their exclusion from both Indonesian and East Timorese narratives of who belongs and who does not.

Concluding Remarks

This article has shown how resettled older East Timorese people dealt with issues such as death, remembrance, and burial in exile. The narratives shared by the interlocutors illustrate how displacement and familial expectations are intricately linked to issues surrounding death and ageing, including older persons' contemplations related to the prospect of dying away from home. The interviews conducted with the interlocutors provide invaluable insights into the strategies employed by those with financial resources to maintain connections with their homeland. These strategies are seen as essential to fulfilling future aspirations of a permanent return to the land. Moreover, the article highlights how those who were involved in past violence have a different perspective on the prospect of returning home, prioritizing long-term familial well-being by adjusting their ideals of future burial places over their own desires (see also Zontini 2015; Nesteruk 2018; Pérez Murcia 2022).

The East Timorese case brings in the perspectives of older displaced persons living in the global South and alternative angles from which we may apprehend death in migratory contexts. The living conditions of former refugee camps and relocation sites in these contexts are often sub-standard and can heighten the health risks for older populations (Bolzman 2014). End-of-life care support might not be readily available and is not targeted for displaced persons (Feldman 2017) or included in the resettlement planning (Bird 2019). Older East Timorese and their families deal with these issues by drawing on past and present knowledges of ageing and dying. For instance, persons' decisions of 'returning to the land' following death, be this in the place of origin or new settlement, draws on local notions of ageing well, a good death, and religious beliefs. Accordingly, older interlocutors' perspectives and practices related to death highlighted their multiple attachments to place and sense of who they are.

Understanding older forcibly displaced migrants' perspectives on death, remembrance, and burial can further shed light on the shifts of belonging over time. By exploring their narratives, this study reveals the nuanced and shifting nature of belonging for displaced communities, particularly as they grapple with the legacies of the Indonesian occupation. While funerals in the new settlement may not necessarily signify a fixed emplacement process, families may still move the deceased's bones across borders when the circumstances allow. Such contemplations and decisions related to death and dying highlight the ongoing challenges faced by displaced communities. The study also underscores the importance of ethnographic research in understanding the multifaceted challenges of forced migration in various socio-cultural contexts. Further research on ageing, death, and dying in displacement contexts across the globe could yield invaluable insights for scholars and practitioners involved in this area. By examining the experiences of older forcibly displaced migrants, this study adds to our understanding

of the intricate issues and legacies that influence the lives of displaced communities.

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ENDNOTES

1. The names of research participants in this article have been altered to protect their identity. Timor island is divided between the sovereign states of Timor-Leste on the eastern side and a territory belonging to the Indonesian East Nusa Tenggara Province on the western side, often referred to as 'West Timor' (excluding Oecussi enclave, which belongs to Timor-Leste). I use the term 'East Timorese' to indicate people with origins in Timor-Leste and as the adjective form.

Acknowledgements

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