



A Jewish Perspective on East Timor

-- Shepard Forman

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Twenty-five years ago, my family and I took leave of anthropological field work in East Timor to spend Passover in Australia, where we participated in a seder hosted by the Israeli Ambassador in Canberra. By chance, we sat across the table from an elderly couple, part of the Jewish diaspora from China, who remembered my wife's parents and grandparents from there and conveyed their memories to us and our young children. Coupled with the Seder and the reading of the Haggadah, I was reminded of what to me is central to Jewish life--a common history, a shared heritage, and the strength and resilience that has come from centuries of suffering and recovery.

East Timor in 1974 was just beginning to experience the promise of Portuguese de-colonization embodied in the "carnation revolution" that ended the Salazar dictatorship. Three fledgling political parties emerged within the colony to debate its future, a choice between continued allegiance to Portugal, independence and accession to Indonesian rule. With independence clearly in the ascendance, the Portuguese withdrew from East Timor, leaving their guns and garrisons at the disposal of independence partisans, and armed conflict soon ensued. Nearly routed, the pro-Indonesian party "invited" Indonesian intervention that occurred massively and brutally in December 1975. In the course of the invasion and the subsequent Indonesian occupation, over 200,000 East Timorese died. The remainder of the population was removed from their ancestral homelands in the mountains and relocated in "strategic hamlets" along the malarial-ridden coast where they have lived ever since on the meager largesse of Indonesia. Lands and jobs were distributed to transmigrants, those Indonesians transplanted from overpopulated islands to the west, while the East Timorese were forced to assimilate to Indonesian culture and language.

Animist by tradition, divided into 26 distinct ethno-linguistic groups, the East Timorese had been isolated from neighboring Indonesian islands and their Dutch colonial masters during the 400 years of Portuguese rule. Although only a few spoke Portuguese or adhered to the Catholic Church during the colonial period, they converted in huge numbers after the Indonesian invasion to seek the

protection of Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo, the co-winner with independence leader Jose Ramos Horta of the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts on behalf of the East Timorese people. A proud and brave people, they have endured half a millenium of cruel and despotic oppression. Resistance to the Indonesian invasion was inevitable, and it has been constant--in daily life, in a simmering mountain insurgency, in occasional street demonstrations, and through prayer.

Hidden from public view through years of Indonesian closure, ignored by the great powers who sought to appease Indonesia or profit from its markets, overshadowed by Cold War concerns and the struggle over apartheid, the East Timorese have struggled valiantly for their survival and their freedom.

My family and I returned to Quelicai in the Spring of 1974, the small administrative post on Mate Bian mountain inhabited by a largely Melanesian people known as the Makassae. We came with the Passover spirit of renewal and a copy of the colorful Haggadah from our Canberra seder. I still recall with wonder the afternoon at my desk when my elderly teacher, a Makassae sage and ritual leader known as Nanai'e Nau Naha spotted our Haggadah. Unable to read or write in any language, he was struck by the drawings of our ancients, depicted, not unlike himself, barefoot and in simple cloths. In leafing through the book, he could not help but notice the different typefaces that described in Hebrew and in English our exodus from Egypt.

"What is this?" he asked, and I explained that it was the history of my people told in our ritual and our daily language at a meal designed to pass on our story from generation to generation. Could I write out their history in their ritual and daily language, he asked, so that his son would know what it means to be Makassae? I could, I said, recalling the linguistic course in which I had learned the art of phonetic script.

Nanai'e aborted my lesson that day and did not return for most of that week. When he did, he brought with him the elders from surrounding family compounds who examined the Haggadah and consulted in a Makassae so animated that I could not understand. Soon Nanai'e approached me, and with a twinkle and a smile that I had come to appreciate as a sign that my lessons were going well, he told me that I was to become the Makassae scribe. The elders had agreed that I should attend their marriage and mortuary rituals, record their myths and legends, and map their genealogy from Uru-Uato (Moon-Sun), their supreme (and only) deity, through generations of begats to Nanaei'e and his only son. To do so was both a privilege and a sacred duty, since in Makassae ideology, it was taboo to speak the names of dead apart from a ritual offering. For that reason, Nanai'e insisted, when the job was done, when he had determined that I had learned all that I needed to know, my questions would cease. And I would sacrifice a ram "whose horns turned twice," at the ancestral burial grounds by Uru-Uato's house, thereby secreting once again the names of the dead.

The next five months were a rapture of learning. My camera, my tape recorder, my diary and I attended births, marriages and funerals. Occasionally, we were guests at the umu gini, the thirty-year after death dispatch of the soul of the departed to the land of the ancestors high on Mate Bian mountain. At the center of each of these rituals was the sacrifice of an animal and an offering of rice brought as a gift for that purpose, always accompanied by a communal meal. I diligently transcribed my tapes, annotated my descriptions and stretched my genealogies across pieces of tracing paper that side by side extended across our small living quarters. One day, when I spotted a woman leading a goat to a neighboring hamlet, I explained to Nanai'e her relationship to the family of the dead man she was going to honor and why the gift had to be made. I described the intimate relationship between life and death, production and reproduction, that is the essence of Makassae belief, ritual and everyday conduct. I unfolded my genealogical charts and traced for him the lineal connection between that woman and the dead man's family, all the way back to Uru-Uato. And he told me to stop, that I knew what I needed to know, and my questions had become taboo.

A week later, we sacrificed my ram and the names were secreted again. I returned to simpler pursuits, studying the layout of rice fields and yam gardens, honing my Makassae and teaching Nanai'e's son how to extend his simple reading knowledge of Portuguese to my phonetic rendering of the Makassae ritual language.

By November, the politics of East Timor were heating up, and we decided that it was best to take our two small children home. We packed our belongings, with special attention to my notebooks and tapes, and returned--after a stay in Lisbon--to Michigan, from where I had taken leave as a professor of anthropology. Life became routine, teaching and writing. I began a book about the Makassae and wrote several articles about their way of life and the belief system that guided it. I began to put in order the materials that I immodestly hoped could become the Makassae Haggadah.

But, perhaps foolishly, I suspended all that after the Indonesians invaded East Timor. Mate Bian, the last region to be pacified by the Portuguese, also became the center of East Timorese resistance. As a result, it bore the brunt of intense fighting beyond the terror that all of East Timor experienced. The last communication I had with Nanai'e early in 1976 was a mere two lines, written in the phonetic script of his son. "There is no food," he wrote. "We are all dying." We packed clothing and seed and sent them off. We appealed to the International Committee of the Red Cross for help. I wrote to our congressmen and our newspaper. I gave congressional testimony, talked to my students and to anyone who cared to listen to the terrible things that were befalling "my people." I did politics and set aside the Haggadah.

I was a quiet voice in a wilderness in which others howled. They are the heroic supporters of the East Timorese resistance and struggle for freedom. Jose

Ramos Horta, Bishop Belo and a small group of faithful supporters and advocates have championed the UN-sanctioned right to East Timorese self-determination for 25 years, and with good result. With the publicity of the Nobel Peace Prize and the waning of strategic interests that marked Indonesian ascendancy during the Vietnam War, with the post-Cold War reassertion of human rights and democratic values, with the economic stresses and strains that made a corrupt Indonesia a less certain ally, and with the fall of Suharto, East Timor finally found itself on the international agenda. After years of cajoling, the UN managed to broker an agreement between the Portuguese and Indonesian governments for a referendum in East Timor on an offer of extended autonomy within Indonesia. If the East Timorese rejected the offer, East Timor could go free, promised Suharto's successor, B.J. Habibie.

We know the rest, because the media is finally paying attention. On August 30, the people of East Timor, despite extreme efforts at intimidation by ragtag militias armed and instigated by the Indonesian military, exercised their right of free choice for the first time in nearly 500 years. Ninety-eight percent of registered voters turned out, under the watchful eyes of hundreds of UN volunteer election observers and un-armed international police, to cast a 78.5 percent vote against autonomy and for independence. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, President Clinton and Secretary of State Albright hailed "the birth of a new nation" and pledged full support to a UN transitional authority that would help guide East Timor to independence.

The East Timorese had no time for celebration. Within a day, reinforced militias appeared on the streets of Dili, the territorial capital, and in villages and family compounds throughout the countryside, terrorizing and killing independence supporters, including the elderly, women and children. UN workers recruited from among the local population were particular targets, and then expatriate UN workers and journalists as well. Successful in driving foreign observers from the countryside and from Dili itself, they attacked and burned the home of Bishop Belo, now in exile in Darwin, Australia, and systematically turned their attention on churches, nuns and priests. Refugee camps and ultimately UN headquarters themselves were not spared, even under the gaze of Indonesian soldiers and police who, despite their protection mandate, participated first indirectly and then directly in the assaults. As I write this, thousands are dead, tens of thousands are in hiding in the mountains, and as many as two hundred thousand East Timorese have been herded into exile elsewhere in Indonesia. Dili is virtually destroyed, and there is no one to bear witness to the butchery that is occurring elsewhere on the island.

The world must not stand idly by while this happens. No one saw the East Timor killing fields 25 years ago, and no one said: "Never again!" We were complacent before in face of the murder of a third of the East Timorese people. We must not be again. In this season of Jewish renewal, we must recall our own history and its coincidence with the history of every oppressed people. We must bear witness

to what is occurring and insist that our government fulfill its promise that those East Timorese who survive will be able to return and build their nation. And I must return to the Makassae Haggadah to help them celebrate their suffering and recovery and share it from generation to generation."

