

Wild Honey: Caring for bees in a divided land

Director's Statement

'Bees are people', said Agus, not long after my family and I had arrived in Kupang with the intention of recording a wild honey harvest in the central border area of the island. This was the first fact I learnt about the insect *Apis dorsata* and its relationship to people, a subject which I had come thousands of kilometres to better understand. This was my second trip to West Timor and it was because of Agus that I was back. The first time we had met, a little over seven years earlier, I had spent time with him and his oldest brother, Balthasar, travelling from the provincial Indonesian capital of Kupang to visit their extended family along the border dividing East and West Timor, a colonial-imposed border that divides not only the island but its people. The royal domain of Agus and Balthasar's ancestors is the mountainous kingdom of Lookeu, which traverses the border.

On the day of my departure from the island seven years earlier, Agus had passed the time at the airport departure lounge telling me intriguing stories of wild honey harvests, and about the associated community ceremonies and his role as a *laku* during these events. *Laku*, in the Tetun language of the border region, refers to the Asian palm civet cat. However, in the context of the honey harvest *laku* refers to a specific group of men who, at certain times of the year, take on the persona of their namesake and climb tens of metres into the forest canopy in pursuit of wild honey and wax. Like *laku*, these men climb in the darkness of the night. Like *laku*, they call out to each other and to others around as they search out the sweetness hidden within the canopy's branches. Brave and sonorous, the *laku* climb great heights comfortably to secure honey and wax accompanied only by firesticks, smoke and song. Once in the canopy they silently receive the inevitable stings on their scantily clad bodies, while imploring the bees to descend and give up their 'houses' (hives) for the benefit of those gathered to sing, dance and consume the honey and bee larvae below. As I was listening intently to these stories back then, I knew that this would not be my last visit. In retrospect, I think that Agus was already hooking me in.

Balthasar and I visited his Lookeu homelands on the East Timorese side of the border in 2012 at a time when a honey harvest was occurring deep in the nearby forest. But we were there for other reasons and did not participate. When we departed we were gifted a jerrycan full of delicious honey to take with us. 'It's excellent medicine,' said Balthasar, advising me to share it with my husband's family who lived elsewhere in the east of the island.

It was not until 2018 that I had the chance to finally attend a wild honey harvest, this time in the Lookeu lands astride the international border. We had arrived in the area with a camcorder, but as I had no prior film-making experience it was my intention to simply record the harvest and return on a subsequent occasion with a film crew. Besides, I understood that the harvest would, by necessity, take place at night in the forest and I had no idea how I could usefully film in that setting. As it turned out, everyone in attendance was keen to help out with the film and make it work. A production plan was thrown together on the hop: torches were purchased for lighting, assistants of all kinds stepped in

to enable the event and a ready-made cast appeared, surprising themselves and each other with their candour and insights.

Earlier in the visit I had been told that this would be a small harvest to be conducted during a few hours, not the usual grand style where one tree might hold up to a hundred or more houses, requiring up to seven *laku* and most of the night for the harvest. I was introduced to one of Agus's childhood friends, Domi, who owned the particular tree to be harvested. He told me the honey was in a type of wild almond tree (*Irvingia malayana*) that his grandfather had planted some fifty years earlier.

Later, Domi took Balthasar and me aside and quietly told us that 'the bees have names: Buik Lorok and Dahur Lorok'. These are female names. Buik is the name of Balthasar's sister; Dahur is the name of one of his female cousins. And Lorok refers to the sun, as well as to divinity or 'the enlightened one'. Domi repeated what I had heard on my arrival in Kupang: 'the bees are people'. Their queens are Buik Lorok and Dahur Lorok and it is they, and their relationships with people, that we would be celebrating at the honey harvest. He explained that the role of *laku* is to sing to the queen bees; to serenade them so that they will recognise their connections.

The songs of the *laku* are ritual love songs. Domi explained that they are sung to touch the hearts of these female bees and entreat them to return to their home year after year. If these songs are not sung and the ceremony is not carried out, Buik Lorok and Dahur Lorok will not return. As proof, Domi told us that one of the other main honey trees in Lookeu had its forty hives improperly harvested during the previous honey season and consequently no bees had returned there this year. Harvesting properly means harvesting communally, with song, ceremony and prayer, leaving in place some of the hive for its immediate rehabilitation if the bees so choose. At the end of the season, when the bees have departed, these trees are then 'cleaned' by the tree's owners. The old hives are removed, and the branches are smoothed off so that these queen bees and their 'houses' will return, hopefully inviting other newcomers to make their houses there as well.

During the lead up to the night-time harvest I had been filming in the forest, tracking the methodical preparation activities of Domi and the *laku* who would later be climbing. I was lulled into an unhurried sense of time during daylight hours, and as darkness quickly fell, I realised that we had quite suddenly reached the event's climax. I scurried back to the forest altar where we had left our bags and put on protective clothing that someone had presciently suggested I purchase. Everybody else, including my husband, Quin, remained in their shorts, sarongs and t-shirts. 'Don't worry,' I was told, 'Bee bites are like medicine. They make you stronger'. In the ensuing hours, I would come to be so thankful for my recently purchased blue plastic rain jacket, matching pants and camouflage balaclava.

As the *laku* began to climb, Quin and various of Balthasar's brothers grabbed the torches and began to track their movements into the trees. But once the harvest began, the bees flew en-masse towards this alternative source of light — and anyone standing near it. What felt and sounded like rain on my plastic jacket was a hail of bees. They came in waves, in unison with the work of the firestick above. By this point, I was filming mostly with my eyes tightly shut. I would know when each wave was due to arrive by the intense bodily

reverberations and smell preceding it. This olfactory sense was quickly augmented by the sharp pain of searing hot needles piercing my gloved hands as I gripped the camera. An elder's words from earlier in the day rang through my head: 'These bees were also used by our ancestors as warriors'. This truly felt like a war zone.

But when the camera was not in use and the torches were off, peace returned to the forest floor. We would be serenaded again by the red blooms of the firesticks and the ritual love songs of the *laku*. The calm was punctuated by the occasional calls from old men on the ground entreating the *laku* to ensure that they were making a date for next year with their beloved bees. Keen for the harvest filming to be a success, these same senior men would periodically call out to admonish the other ground-dwellers to stop their banter. 'Be quiet, we are SHOOTING', they would yell. All during these exchanges, a pulley system of buckets was used to convey the oozing honeycomb from the high branches to the ground, where a small team of men were waiting to collect it and, amidst the swarming bees, carry it off to the forest altar to be strained and later distributed amongst the harvest participants.

Although these types of honey harvest ceremonies were once carried out right across island Timor, it is now only in the most remote and mountainous areas that the practices continue. In Lookeu, as people continue their acts of care for bees moving across borders, the lived reality of division is also at the centre of their story. Wars and violent displacement of people since the imposed colonial division in 1859, deforestation, changes in land use and crop composition are rapidly changing the island landscape, and its attractiveness and carrying capacity for bees. Ironically, the suffering and displacement experienced by the Lookeu community along both sides of a remote and once dangerous mountain border has also kept others out and allowed the survival of the relatively intact forests which are so essential for their continued relations with wild honey bees.

What I learnt through the filming process was the vital importance of these wild honey harvest rituals to the maintenance of the bees' movement across the region and to people's desire to preserve their shared identity. The making of this film was and remains a collective endeavour. Each time it is shown to audiences, both Timorese and foreign, new and often unexpected conversations open-up —about bees and people, borders and relationships. *Wild Honey: Caring for bees in a divided land* now has a life of its own.

-Lisa Palmer 2019