

DANCERS

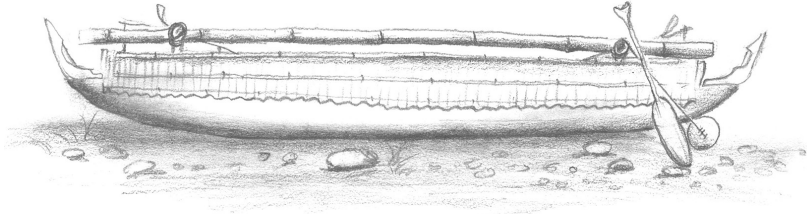
*on the*

SEA

*Stories from Ataúro Island, Timor-Leste*

*1994 - 2002*

GABRIELLE SAMSON



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

My story is set in the years prior to 2002, during six of the twelve years I lived and worked on Ataúro Island in East Timor. I was living on the remote island because I wanted, in some way, to help make the world a better place. I was there because I had been invited and had skills that might contribute something to an impoverished, illiterate community. I was there because I'd had breast cancer four years before and thought I might die. I was there, indirectly, because I knew then that I would not live forever which made me eager to be useful in some way, while I could. It also made me curious to understand more about what it is to be a human being. I was on a quest to learn.

My story is not separate from the stories of others with whom I shared this place and time and their stories are interwoven with mine. Many tales of Timor are about the evil oppressors and the innocent oppressed – heroes and villains, black and white. This one isn't. It's about an island in an occupied land, and the lives of ordinary people who lived there; it's a story of wonder, tears, laughter and love during a time of violence and huge change in a remote corner of the world. The events discussed in this book are all real, however some names have been changed to maintain the privacy of individuals. If there are any errors in my memoir, I apologise to my Ataúro friends.

# PROLOGUE

## ATAÚRO

This is Anton's blanket I'm wearing, faded now, still heavy on my shoulders but soft with age and wear. When sea breezes turn the evenings cool, I wrap it around me like he did; a traditional Timorese tais cloth, closely woven from hand-spun thread and hand-dyed the colours of indigo and other mountain plants, once it was thick and coarse. It no longer smells of him – his soap, sweat, the sea salt on his skin – but the feel of him is in it still, and still delights me. Like so many other things around me – faces, voices, the pungent smells of sea and heavy rain, shadows cast by the mountains, canoes dancing on the waves – this blanket is filled with memories, familiar things. Here and now, as I am, in this very different present, all around are echoes of the past: sweet, funny, sad echoes, and mysteries I no longer need to understand.

That bougainvillea by the fence – its flame-red flowers remind me of a strange and intimate afternoon tea party. It was September 1999 and teacups for three were set out on a little table under the bougainvillea in the pavilion, then called the “round house”, in the military compound. They were fine china cups with matching saucers, patterned with yellow roses and green leaves; I remember clearly the delicate gold rims of the

cups. The tablecloth was snowy white with a crochet border. The commandant's revolver was placed on it as a kind of centrepiece.

The commandant loved his revolver. He'd displayed it to us many times before. When he took it from its holster, he introduced it as his "second wife", fondling it suggestively with fat fingers before placing it carefully in a conspicuous place – sometimes pressed against the temples of men – where it would not be forgotten.

'Please,' he said on this fine, sociable afternoon, 'have some tea.'

So we drank sweet Indonesian tea out of fine china cups under the bougainvillea – it was not as large then, but just as vibrantly scarlet as it is now – eating fried bananas while we made conversation with the soldier and attempted to avert our eyes from his second wife resting on the table between us.

While we sipped tea, the commandant talked about his family back in Surabaya and how he missed them. He showed us pictures: "first" wife with her round, serious face and traditional Javanese bun at the nape of her neck; two teenage daughters, pert, short modern hairstyles, bobs, staring proudly out of their military father's much-fingered photos.

It was all very pretty and very civilised. We took a great interest in his family. We thought it best to be polite.

It was four days after the referendum that sealed the fate of Timor Timur and set the seed of independence for Timor-Leste. Just a couple of days before mayhem, murder and destruction at the hands of military-backed militia would devastate the little country. While the outcome of the referendum was yet unknown, our commandant was calm, self-assured and blissfully delusional. Anton and I were patient and polite.

# PART ONE

## SATYA WACANA CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY (UKSW), CENTRAL JAVA, 1993

My year of illness and uncertainty was over. My daughter was at university in Brisbane exploring her life as an adult, and I was still alive after a breast cancer operation and all the doubt and medical treatments that went with it: surgery, radiation, chemotherapy. I was alive, for now at least, and so could go out into the world on my quest.

In 1993 I started work at Satya Wacana University's Institute of Community Service (LPM), a small centre tucked away in a leafy corner of the campus in Salatiga, Central Java. I worked as advisor and trainer in the early childhood education outreach program, in poor rural areas. I'd discovered LPM when I was studying the Indonesian language at Satya Wacana and was delighted when my offer to work there for a year was accepted.

My work was initially focused on a large village in the Getasan Sub-district. In Polobogo Village we worked with education department officials, teachers, parents, and children in three kindergartens. I often stayed up there in the mountains and so began to learn about Javanese village life.

In the town of Salatiga, I lived in a tiny house in the working-class kampung of Klaseman, where I shared a courtyard – running

water and a washing area – with three other households. My neighbours' children had no access to books, so I started a library in my sitting room and, with the addition of paper, crayons and paints it soon became a lively childrens' centre. Klaseman was an Islamic neighbourhood and, although I worked at the Christian university, once assured that I was no evangelist – not even a Christian really – I was accepted as neighbour and friend.

It was an ever-interesting place to live: the kind of poor neighbourhood where, in the local hole-in-the-wall store, you could buy sugar and oil in tiny 25-gram packs, and cigarettes by the single stick; the kind of neighbourhood where the men were labourers or dokkar (horse-drawn wagon) drivers. We had meetings on Friday nights to discuss local issues, and weekly working bees to sweep our lanes; we had to report to the village head if we had overnight guests and, five times a day, non-synchronized calls to prayer from five small mosques rang through our houses. It was a fantastic place to live and where someone like me, on a quest to understand herself and humanity, had plenty of opportunity to learn. Here were whole new ways of looking at life – at kindness, at expectations, at grief and humour, at conflict, manners, and relationships. It was challenging and wonderful.

My work and home life were everything I wanted, my language and cultural understanding were growing and consolidating. So when I was asked by the university to stay on for another year to continue the program, of course I agreed – I felt I was just starting to be useful. In my second year, our work with kindergarten teachers was extended to the far reaches of eastern Indonesia – to Sumba and West Timor. The program now took me into more amazing places where I worked with extraordinary people in extraordinary cultures. I loved it.

## JUNE 1994

On campus in Salatiga I shared an office with Sampurno and Miyono, both enthusiastic Javanese community development workers. Their friends often visited; usually young thinkers, students and academics – they dropped by to discuss ideas, tell jokes, gossip. Sitting on the low, wide ledges of our office windows or dragging up wooden stools, they argued with passion in that safe place about the Soeharto government in the mid-90s, the military, about university politics, poverty, development, who was doing what with whom in the university world.

One day when I came into our room, a stranger was sitting on the window ledge talking with Sam and Miyono. A tall, thin man, he spoke softly, had their full attention and was making them smile. There seemed to be a gentler atmosphere in that small office while he spoke; its usual bustle missing. The visitor, an Ambonese man called Anton, had come from East Timor and was telling stories of his work there. For the first time, I heard of a remote Timorese island called Ataúro where UKSW ran a community outreach program.

From my desk in the corner, I didn't catch everything he said. I heard snatches about fishing projects, people's struggle for survival in that harsh place, the isolation of it, the island's poverty; I heard about small boats and wild seas, the joys and frustrations of working with the island community. The man told his stories with love and laughter, and what I heard touched my heart and my imagination.



MALAYSIA

SUMATRA

EAST  
MALAYSIA

BRUNEI

KALIMANTAN

JAWA

BALI

SULAWESI

OECUSSE  
(enclaye)

ATAURO

SUMBA

WEST  
TIMOR

TIMOR  
LESTE

JACO

AUSTRALIA

WEST  
PAPUA

PAPUA  
NEW  
GUINEA

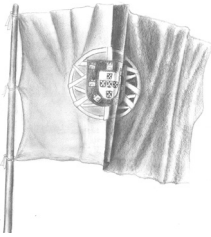
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# PART TWO

## EAST TIMOR: A BRIEF HISTORY

### INVADERS 1: THE PORTUGUESE



The Portuguese came to Timor around the middle of the sixteenth century and stayed a very long time. For over four hundred and fifty years, they patrolled the coastlines and rugged mountains of Portuguese Timor, cutting sandalwood, planting coffee, extracting taxes from native peoples and forcing them to labour on roads and plantations. Like their English, Dutch, French and Spanish sisters, Portuguese women made sacrifices for their Empires so that their menfolk – seafarers and colonisers – could voyage over vast oceans and toss about in little sailing ships; taking flags to the remote corners of the earth that they proudly occupied, plundered and controlled.

In 1859 the invaders and exploiters of remote eastern kingdoms split up the lands they didn't own. Bending over heavy wooden tables, Portuguese and Dutch fingers traced over yellow maps – 'this for me and that for you; that for me and this for you' – drawing lines that divided peoples, cultures, clans and families

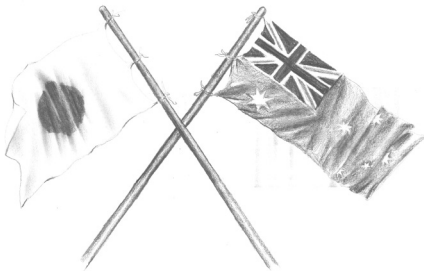
forever. The eastern half of the island of Timor remained part of Portugal's empire and the western half of the island, apart from the enclave of Macassar, part of the Dutch empire.

This was decided in 1859, reshuffled in 1893, and finalised by treaty in 1914.

In 1949 West Timor became part of a newly independent Indonesia and East Timor remained Portuguese Timor until 1975.

The Portuguese didn't do a lot for the Timorese over four hundred and fifty-odd years – years that were more about the glory and wealth of Portugal than the development of Timor. Towards the end of their occupation, they brought Catholicism to the animist land and education to an elite group of Timorese who learned the Portuguese language and developed a love for it and the small, fading European nation a world away.

## INVADERS 2: THE JAPANESE



During the Second World War, Japan and Australia fought each other on mainland Timor. Part of Australian war legend is that the “kind and goodly Timorese villagers” helped

Australian soldiers to hold off the Japanese. Like the “fuzzy wuzzy angels” of New Guinea, the Timorese helped Australian soldiers to overcome their enemies in the mountains of their land, before they could reach the shores of northern Australia.

Poor and powerless in the battle but canny and kind-hearted, the Timorese have been exalted and mythologised in Australian history – making it difficult to explain Australia's turning a blind

eye to the invasion and occupation of their little country by our Indonesian neighbour in 1975.

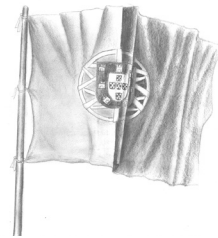
## JAPANESE ON ATAÚRO ISLAND

Japanese soldiers came to Ataúro for a period during the war, but I've never heard stories of brutality or exceptional cruelty during that time, only of island people being shouted at and abused in a foreign language, and being forced to do the bidding of new bosses. Having experienced Portuguese colonialism for many years this was nothing new, and people became skilled at following orders in a language they didn't understand.

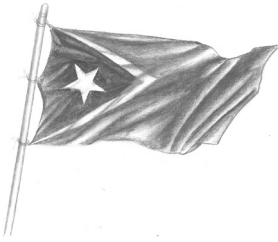
Elderly Ataúro men laughingly still tell stories of how their fathers pretended to understand Japanese even when they didn't, and how they had to bluff their way into or out of a situation as shouts grew harsher and louder and even more difficult to comprehend. This skill at pretending worked and served the Ataúro people well, right up to their own independence referendum in 1999.

## INVADERS 3: RETURN OF THE PORTUGUESE

Post WW2, the Portuguese came back, but it was never quite the same. By 1961, there were political stirrings and the formation of liberation movements in other Portuguese colonies (Angola, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique) and, in the east, their Indonesian neighbours were demanding independence from the Dutch.



## THE TWELVE DAY INDEPENDENCE AND THE CIVIL WARS



Life in Portuguese Timor continued for some time without much change, but by 1975 the wider world had changed, and it was no longer desirable to be a colonial power. The Carnation Revolution in 1974 and the political changes it brought meant that the Portuguese government and its people no longer wanted to own Timor. The decolonisation process moved quickly – too quickly – and, after centuries of foreign rule and years of fierce resistance, suddenly independence was promised. Excited Timorese elites began forming their own political parties, each with elaborate hopes and dreams for their country – and themselves – and competing for control of it

Before the official independent government election was held, UDT, one of the stronger parties, mounted a coup, fearing that their main opposition, Fretilin, was gaining popularity. This led to a battle – later called the Civil War – between the opposing groups of Timorese and sent the country into turmoil. The Portuguese administration, no longer able to control events, fled the erupting mayhem in Dili over the sea to Ataúro, leaving the Timorese on the mainland to fight it out. From the distance and safety of the island, the chief Portuguese administrator tried to rule the colony and bring about negotiations for a resolution, but by this time there was little support or interest from the mother country. In the end, he and his people could only wait, as did the Ataúro people, to learn what was happening in the capital across the sea.

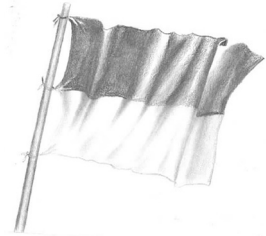
The Fretilin Party won the battle and, on November 28 1975, raised its flag to take what it saw as its rightful place as the rulers of Portuguese Timor... but their newly independent Democratic

Republic of East Timor government was in power for less than a fortnight.

While ambitious Timorese were fighting each other for supremacy, powerful people in more influential countries (even in countries like Australia that may have owed allegiance to the Timorese for their wartime support) watched on and conferred, brows creased in growing concern. Stroking their chins and shaking their heads, these people reached an agreement: a troublesome little *independent* country in that particular neck of the woods, an *uncontrolled* independent country that showed a tendency towards socialist values and was seen to be developing a friendship with other troublesome *little countries* like Cuba, was *not* a good thing, definitely *not* a good thing... so the powerful people of influential countries turned their gaze in the direction of Indonesia and nodded.

## INVADERS 4: INDONESIA

On December 7 1975, Timor was invaded again; Indonesian planes and parachutes, ships and soldiers with weapons, arrived. Over the next few weeks they slaughtered, raped and tortured hundreds of Timorese as they



established military control over the country. The Australian government and the governments of other powerful western countries looked the other way. When Australian journalists were killed by Indonesian soldiers in Balibo, they did not seem to see it, nor did they seem to notice the diminishing population of Timor as thousands lost their lives – not only in the first few weeks of the invasion, but over the next twenty-five years.

## THE SANTA CRUZ MASSACRE, DILI

The Indonesian invasion of Timor began on December 7 1975, and its brutal occupation continued for many years. Brutal, too, was the determined East Timorese resistance to it. Acts of violence were rife. However, events in the country were largely ignored by the rest of the world until, in 1991, there was one event that attracted attention and changed everything.

On November 11 1991, near the entrance to the Santa Cruz Cemetery in Dili, Indonesian soldiers opened fire on a procession of Timorese mourners carrying flowers to the grave of an activist shot by the military the week before. The procession had left the Motael Church down near the port and the mourners were walking, praying and singing in commemoration and protest of his murder, to Santa Cruz.

Outside the cemetery, armed soldiers waited and a skirmish occurred in which an Indonesian soldier was allegedly stabbed. The soldiers then opened fire on hundreds of unarmed Timorese gathered on the road. People fled through the cemetery; people were shot dead; people were wounded and loaded onto military trucks to be taken away and never seen again.

Max Stahl, a British activist and filmmaker, was filming the procession, and captured everything. He continued to video, burying his film cassettes in the cemetery and courageously later retrieving them and releasing his film internationally. It was then that the world saw and was finally forced to acknowledge what was happening in East Timor.

*In December of that year, I searched Indonesian newspapers in the library of Satya Wacana University for reports of this event and found, on page 3 of the Jakarta Post (the English language paper), a paragraph briefly describing a 'disturbance' in Dili. I found no mention of it in other papers; while the world was shocked into*

*outrage by the carnage of Santa Cruz, most Indonesian citizens were kept comfortably in the dark about the event.*