Outside in: Finding my Musical Community in Rural East Timor

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Abstract

This article explores what it might mean to be a musician in a community, considering the author's recent experiences as a visiting artist in a remote part of East Timor as a manifestation of this. East Timor is one of Asia's poorest and least-developed countries, a former Portuguese colony that suffered brutal occupation by Indonesia for 24 years and which has only been an independent state since 2002.

The author establishes a community musician's role as an "outsider" to the communities in which they work, and considers this in terms of her four-month artist residency as an unknown foreigner in a developing rural community. Through narrative inquiry and an autoethnographic lens she describes a project that grew organically from very informal and unstructured beginnings to a public performance outcome, and which became an indicator of her place within the community. The author's experiences and interactions are discussed as possible gifts, acts of invitation and welcome, tests and exchanges, which ultimately suggested a transition from outsider to accepted community member.

Key words:
Community music, East Timor, collaboration, informal learning, cross-cultural

Introduction: The facilitator as outsider

Being an "outsider" in my professional life as a community music facilitator is a familiar role for me. I lead creative music projects on behalf of arts or education organisations that take place in environments where I am not a natural member. However, within the creative music workshop setting there are common understandings—a familiarity with the culture of the environment, its rules and structures, a motivation towards the project at hand (particularly if the group is self-selecting), a common language for communication—these and others inform our initial interactions.

In time too, the creative process we undertake together, emphasising openness to unpredictable musical outcomes, ensemble playing and collaborative invention of new music, can yield a strong sense of community as a natural by-product (as observed in Higgins, 2007b). In this new community everyone is an insider as it is a community of shared experience, established by the project itself and the environment that I create which invites people to take part, and values each person's contributions.

In this article, I consider my recent experiences as an outsider leading a community music project in an environment where I was a foreigner in every way—a remote town in the fledgling independent state of East Timor, where I spent four months undertaking an artist residency in 2010-2011. This experience demonstrated quite powerfully and yet subtly, what being a musician in a community is at its core. A project that grew organically to become an indicator of my place within the community is described, its progression from informal and unstructured through to performance outcome charted here. I follow this description with a

discussion of the project, its possible meanings and interpretations, and conclude with a reconsideration of my "outsider" status.

East Timor's Cultural Context

East Timor is a half-island that sits between the northern edge of Australia and the eastern reaches of the Indonesian archipelago. It is the poorest and least developed country in Asia. The country is ranked 120 out of 169 countries in the U.N. Human Development Index—a comparative measure of life expectancy, literacy, education and standards of living—and it is estimated that 41 percent of the million-strong population live below the poverty line (UNHR, 2011).

East Timor's current context is complex. A Portuguese colony for 500 years, it remained under-developed and isolated, with traditional ways of life continuing for the vast majority of the population. It suffered full-scale military invasion by the Indonesian army in 1975, and lived under brutal Indonesian occupation for 24 years, a period that led directly to the deaths of nearly a quarter of the Timorese population (around 180,000 people) and the rise of a popular resistance movement (Kingsbury & Leach, 2007).

The East Timorese voted for their independence in a UN-sponsored referendum in 1999. The Indonesian army's subsequent withdrawal was bloody and merciless, leaving 70% of the country's physical infrastructure – roads, buildings, telecommunications—burned and destroyed, thousands killed, and thousands more displaced and traumatised (Chomsky, 2003; East Timor Government, 2008). A UN transitional administration governed the country until 2002, and a UN political mission remains in place in 2011. In 2006 and 2007 further crises broke out, with more violent loss of life, displacement and trauma.

Thus, contemporary East Timor melds its indigenous identities with "the cultural baggage of its consecutive colonial occupiers, meshing these in varying degrees of success with the requirements of the larger contemporary world" (Kingsbury & Leach, 2007, p. 15). The population is hardy and proud, but living with the traumatic memories of recent events and a weariness of instability and foreign involvement in their land.

As part of my residency, I spent two months in a remote town called Lospalos in the eastern corner of the half-island. Lospalos is a small town surrounded by pristine jungle, highlands, and small-scale agriculture. The majority of people live on subsistence farming. Electricity is available only in the evenings. There are no landlines—only mobile phones. There is a single strip of shops, a small daily produce market and a larger weekly market that attracts buyers and sellers from the small villages throughout the district. The lack of convenient and affordable travel options to Lospalos, and the town's distance from the Timorese capital of Dili means that very few foreign visitors get to Lospalos.

Methodology - Describing these Experiences

In this account I examine the meaning of my experiences in Lospalos as a narrative inquiry considered through an autoethnographic lens. I was there as a practitioner rather than as a researcher, and draw upon my detailed field journal, video footage and autoethnographic recollection.

These narratives are embedded within my experiences, rather than being descriptions of particular events (Squire, Andrews, & Tamboukou, 2008). There is no "certainty" here—

others present during the events I describe might proffer different narratives and interpretations (Barrett & Stauffer, 2009, p. 2; Bowman, 2009. p. 214). I've framed my interpretation of the meanings of these experiences with Higgins' conceptualisations of the hospitality and unconditional welcome inherent within community music (Higgins, 2007a, 2007b). These conceptual tools offered a way of analysing the experiences and placing them within the broader Community Music field of inquiry.

Within the narrative I refer to myself in the first person. A second protagonist in the events described is my partner Tony, a professional musician who worked with me during my time in Lospalos.

An Outsider in Lospalos

I struggled to develop music projects in Lospalos when I first arrived. I had a host organisation whose activities were, I'd understood, based in Lospalos (albeit with Australian-based directors); however it quickly became evident that they had no real presence or profile in the town. My proposals for exchanges with traditional musicians, collaborative projects with adult musicians and children, and training opportunities for young musicians and teachers, received initially enthusiastic, but later prevaricating responses. Support from the local Ministry of Culture—the official channel through which music activity should normally happen—was offered in words but not matched by deeds.

I keenly felt myself to be an outsider and a person who had been invited to work in Lospalos by other foreigners, rather than by locals. The local people had no particular context for my residency, and it did not seem to have come about in response to any initiative or expressed need from them.

The Motalori Context

The house I rented in Lospalos was in the Motalori locality. An old and sturdy white brick Portuguese-era house, it was on relatively high ground, surrounded by grass and coconut palms. My landlord and his young family lived in a wooden dwelling behind my house. Most of the other houses in Motalori were simple wooden structures with dirt floors and walls made of palm leaf shingles and flat roofs with no ceilings. On rainy days the bare land surrounding their homes quickly turned to mud.

I sensed social division in this neighbourhood, in terms of who played with whom, and who talked with whom. The local boys – numerous and boisterous – were regular visitors to our house, but whenever they turned up, the landlady's children would leave the group and head back to their house. I asked their mother about this. "Those boys are too dirty. Their clothes are always dirty," she stated matter-of-factly, explaining that her children didn't like playing with them for this reason. She told me, "In Timor, if you go to someone else's house, you should put on your clean clothes. When these children come to your house in dirty clothes, you should send them away. It's not respectful."

I was not concerned about the boys' clothes, but I noted the exclusion. I had the impression that these boys had limited life opportunities. Only a few attended school, several couldn't read or write at all, they weren't used to being organised as a group, and they didn't know Tetun (the national language, not local to Lospalos and usually learned in kindergarten or school). These were very poor people and in addition to not having clean clothes to wear each day, many did not have enough food to eat. They were small for their age and very thin.

These apparent divisions notwithstanding, there seemed to me to be a strong sense of community in Motalori. As with many traditional societies, "community" in East Timor is a far more bounded notion than it is in the individualistic West. Systems of kinship are clearly defined, and friendships often observe geographical boundaries for the children. Language binds people and also distinguishes them—East Timor has 16 different languages and subvarieties present across the small land mass (Taylor-Leech, 2007).

Jamming with the Motalori children

Local children initially stopped in front of my house out of curiosity, their interest aroused by the instruments they could hear us playing. They were shy at first, but once one group had decided to venture forth, the word spread, and the numbers of visitors increased each time the instruments came out.

These visits became jams on the veranda and were daily, informal music-making sessions for anyone who wanted to turn up. They took place without any special planning or promotion and were open to all. I spoke quite good Tetun by this time (the local language in Lospalos is Fataluku, but many people spoke or understood Tetun) and this helped me establish a rapport with the children and to lead the sessions.

At those early jams the children were a large, noisy group, street-smart and quick-witted. Mostly boys, they were excited to play music, but they snatched and grabbed at instruments in a very chaotic way. I wasn't always sure I liked these boys at the beginning. Sometimes they were so rowdy and aggressive it made me want to pack everything up and send them away. Later, watching video footage of the earliest jam sessions, I saw how focused they were, despite their tremendous excitement. They loved coming to us, and began to watch us throughout the day, waiting for us to go into the music room off the veranda where we stored the instruments. Within 60 seconds of instruments appearing, they would arrive.

Musical information was communicated non-verbally or through symbols and repetition. We explored songs with percussion accompaniment, experimented with structures and graphic scores, and jammed on traditional chants and songs in the local Fataluku language. Sometimes, older boys would volunteer *tebe tebe* (traditional dance rhythms) that they knew, or sing popular songs, accompanying themselves on guitar.

In time, the group of boys who came to us most regularly became the leaders of the jam ensemble. They were the ones most familiar with the instruments and with the cues Tony and I used. They helped us prepare the workshop space before each jam, and would guide others who were less familiar with the workshop routine. They took it in turns to play the chime bars, and would watch the players before them intently, memorising the riffs and progressions so that they would be ready to play when it was their turn. Each time a new melody or riff was invented, it would pass through the group, peer teaching peer.

Girls rarely came to the informal jams. Girls participated in the more formal workshops we conducted at other Lospalos venues; however, the late-afternoon veranda jams were male-dominated events.

We had a range of instruments to share, including drums fashioned from large plastic buckets, and soft-drink bottles filled with high-pressure air that gave a bell-like pitch when struck. Three sets of resonant metal chime bars provided melodic and harmonic material, and pairs of bamboo "claves" ensured enough instruments for everyone. Children also started to

bring their own instruments to the veranda—including plastic piping that was blown like a trumpet, a guitar, and a descant recorder.

Our instrument-making efforts led to the discovery that our next-door neighbour Mario had traditional instrument-making skills. Mario taught Tony how to make a *kakalo*, a bamboo log drum that was traditionally played by children to scare foraging animals away from precious food crops (King, 1963). We later organised an instrument-making day, making a further 12 *kakalos* with the help of local teenagers.

Towards a performance outcome

I learned in Lospalos how few popular or contemporary songs there were in Fataluku. Popular music on the radio was mostly in Indonesian or English. Church songs were sung in Tetun. Local artists had limited opportunities to record their original music.

A popular song on radio at the time was *Forever Young*. As a gift for my teenage friends, I decided to translate the English lyrics of this song into Fataluku. Jamming on *Forever Young* became a regular part of the daily veranda jams and attracted older participants to the jams, including a teenage guitarist and several girl singers. In the last week of my residency we decided the time was right to present the song—and our music-making—to a wider audience.

We arranged to give a live performance of the song on local evening radio. On the day of the performance I had no idea who would turn up. Timorese people prefer to stay inside their homes after dark—there is a sense of self-imposed curfew that remains after their recent history of riots and instability, and years of military occupation.

I was delighted when the group started to arrive at the house, dressed in smart clean clothes for the occasion. Even more gratifying was the sight of Mario arriving with several of his sons, his recorder in his hand. We were touched that he'd decided to come along. This was no longer just a children's activity, but a collaboration among like-minded people.

Before the performance, everyone was very nervous. Mario's hands were shaking. We squeezed into the tiny studio space, squashed on the floor or lined up against the wall. Afterwards, there was a palpable sense of pride in the event. No-one had ever done something like this before. It was the first time that the radio station had ever broadcast children, or presented *malae* [foreigners] and Timorese people performing together.

Discussion and Conclusion—Of Gifts, Tests, and Friendship

What motivated the Motalori boys to come to our house each day? It was a fun and social diversion, and an opportunity to interact with new people and new things. I believe many of the children saw it as an important learning opportunity. They demonstrated a hunger for experiences, an impressive capacity to absorb new things and were strongly self-motivated.

The veranda jams were an unconditional, open invitation from Tony and me—an invitation with some "imposed conditions" (Higgins, 2008, p. 333) in that we decided when the music would happen each day, but in which our leadership and welcome demonstrated a willingness to "give something without getting anything back" (p.333). Participants could come and go as they chose, and they could influence the music-making in different ways. They could learn to play something, or they could just join in on the spot. They chose what they wanted to play, negotiating instrument changes with each other rather than with me.

The teaching and learning was multi-directional, moving from the facilitators to the participants, between the participants, and from participants back to us, which corresponds with Higgins' (2008) description of the workshop as a democratic event, where "the power… lies with everybody" (p. 333). There was constant peer teaching, and the regular sharing of traditional rhythms, chants and songs from the participants with us.

The acts of generosity and exchange extended beyond the music-making. The local boys located and loaned us a wheelbarrow when we needed to take our instruments to the local kindergarten for a workshop. They took great pride in wheeling everything into town for us. My ability to speak Tetun was part of the exchange and gift—it demonstrated a commitment from me to the community, and in return, the children engaged us in conversation, shared information and jokes, and tried to school us in their local language. Mario our next-door neighbour built a relationship with us—first sharing his knowledge of traditional instrument-making, then by wanting to learn the recorder, by sharing further traditional music knowledge with my visiting students from Australia, and by participating in the performance at the radio station.

Some participants tested my unconditional welcome. On the evening of the radio performance, several girls from the house next door asked me to collect them on our way to the radio station. I did as promised, but they did not emerge. Two days later I saw them and learned they'd been avoiding me. "We thought you'd be angry," one said, "because we didn't come to sing." I was taken aback and assured them they never had to sing if they didn't want to.

Perhaps there were other tests—conscious or otherwise. However, by the end of my residency, I no longer felt such an outsider. My last week in particular was one where people's trust in me, or liking of me, showed itself more explicitly. There had been a dramatic midnight burglary, when the entire neighbourhood was woken by my startled screams, as well as numerous workshops in all parts of the Lospalos community, and perhaps the combination of these made people more inclined to approach me—especially women and teenage girls. Perhaps my screams demonstrated my normalness to them, where in the past I had only appeared foreign and suspicious, and our efforts in the community were recognised as being an appreciated contribution that no-one had expected, nor experienced with visiting *malae* before.

It is particularly satisfying for me to recognise that it was the *community* that told me what it wanted from a musician in their midst. They did not want (or perhaps understand) a formal, structured creative music project. They were happy to just get to know me, one day at a time, and see how I conducted myself. They appreciated the time I spent with their children, and the way I engaged with their local music traditions. And in turn, they allowed themselves to be changed by my presence, making their own instruments and playing them in the evenings, remembering some almost-forgotten traditions, and even, on those last days, playing all together—the noisy boys and the landlord's quiet, clean children—on the veranda, while we packed up the last of the instruments and made our way inside.

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