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Live of East Timorese Ex-Refugees: Past Trauma, The Role of Catholic Church, and Digital Technology

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Abstract

This research undertakes an ethnographic exploration of the intricate impact of historical trauma on individuals hailing from Timor−Leste, specifically those who underwent forced migration during the tumultuous events surrounding the 1999 referendum. By centering on the life trajectories of Timor−Leste's former residents across multiple generations, the study delves into the complex interplay of trauma, economic challenges, the role of catholic church and the dynamic role played by digital technology in the lives of those who sought refuge in Nusa Tenggara Timur, Indonesia as the coping mechanisms adopted by these individuals as they navigate the profound traumas arising from the conflict. Additionally, the study aims to examine their resilience in the face of adversities, particularly during the challenging times of the COVID−19 pandemic. Furthermore, it seeks to unravel the intricate ways in which digital technology, encompassing smartphones and social media platforms, has become an influential factor in shaping their intricate life trajectories. Through a nuanced exploration of these elements, the research endeavours to contribute valuable insights into the multifaceted dimensions of the post−traumatic experiences of this community and the evolving role of technology in their coping mechanisms and adaptation strategies.

Introduction

The 1999 referendum in Timor−Leste was a watershed moment, a culmination of longstanding struggles for self−determination. As the nation sought to carve its identity, the tumult that ensued propelled numerous individuals into a forced migration, seeking refuge amidst the uncertainties that accompanied political upheaval (Zinoman and Peluso, 2002). This research places a lens on the varied life trajectories of Timor−Leste's diaspora, investigating how historical trauma has woven its threads into the fabric of their existence across generations. The multifaceted nature of trauma is a central theme in this exploration. Beyond the immediate and visceral impacts of conflict and displacement, we aim to discern the enduring psychological and emotional reverberations that persist in the lives of those who sought refuge in Nusa Tenggara Timur, Indonesia. Through meticulous ethnographic methods, we seek to capture the narratives of resilience and adaptation within this community, unraveling the coping mechanisms adopted by individuals navigating the profound traumas of the past. An integral aspect of this research is the recognition of the evolving socio−technological landscape that shapes contemporary human experiences. Digital technology, particularly the ubiquity of smartphones and social media platforms, has emerged as a powerful force influencing connectivity, communication, and coping mechanisms. As we delve into the lives of the Timor−Leste diaspora, we aim to elucidate how these technological tools have become integral in shaping their intricate life trajectories, offering avenues for connection, expression, and adaptation in the face of historical trauma.

The COVID−19 pandemic, a contemporary global challenge, introduces a new layer of complexity to our exploration. The COVID−19 pandemic has emerged as a significant source of stress, bringing with it a host of challenges. The uncertainty surrounding the pandemic's resolution, coupled with factors such as social distancing,

isolation, stigma, discrimination against those affected, and economic hardships, collectively contribute to the strain on the mental well−being of the broader community. A report from the World Health Organization (WHO) underscores the global impact on mental health, revealing a 25% increase in the prevalence of anxiety and depression during the first year of the COVID−19 pandemic (Brunier, 2022). Building on this perspective, Devora Kestel's insights, as outlined in the Covid−19 Task Force Report, affirm that a substantial 80% of the challenges posed by COVID−19 are rooted in psychological issues, with the remaining 20% comprising physical health problems. This distinction underscores the profound impact of the pandemic on mental well−being, highlighting the intricate interplay between psychological and physical health dimensions in the context of this global crisis (Winurini, 2020).

The mental health challenges arising from the Covid−19 pandemic stem from a confluence of factors. The imperative to observe social distancing and self−isolation introduces a sense of isolation, while the economic downturn witnessed during the pandemic, characterized by escalating unemployment and financial strain, compounds the stressors. Witnessing the loss of lives due to Covid−19 adds another layer of trauma and stress, contributing to the overall psychological burden. Moreover, the presence of stigma and discrimination against individuals affected by Covid−19 exacerbates the mental health challenges, fostering an environment of social unease and prejudice. Together, these multifaceted factors intertwine to shape the intricate landscape of mental health struggles in the wake of the pandemic (Thakur, V., & Jain, 2020).

As the world grapples with the realities of a public health crisis, we extend our gaze to the Timor−Leste diaspora, investigating how this community confronts and copes with adversities during these challenging times. We witness the conditions of social and economic exclusion faced by the former refugee community of East Timor present a distinctive perspective on the heightened prevalence of anxiety and depression due to Covid−19 in the region. This community grapples with multiple layers of discrimination, stemming from their status as immigrants and refugees, highlighting their social vulnerability in a place where they are not native. This predicament further exacerbates their economic challenges. Additionally, residing in border areas poses geographical difficulties, making it often challenging to access infrastructure development and communication technology. Compounded by their refugee status, they also encounter obstacles in securing rights to the land they presently occupy (Puspitosari & Rahayu, 2023). By examining the resilience of individuals who have navigated the intersections of historical trauma and present−day crises, we seek to contribute valuable insights into the adaptive strategies employed in the face of multifaceted challenges. The intertwining of historical trauma, forced migration, the role of catholic church, and contemporary challenges creates a rich tapestry of experiences within the Timor−Leste diaspora. Through this interdisciplinary research, we aim to provide a nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in their lives. Our exploration is not confined to statistical analyses but endeavors to capture the lived experiences, narratives, and coping mechanisms that define the resilience of individuals whose histories have been shaped by forces beyond their control.

In the subsequent chapters, we will delve into the methodological foundations of our ethnographic approach, detailing the strategies employed to capture the richness of lived experiences across generations. Exploring experiences across generations is crucial to understand how historical trauma and forced migration shape not only individual perspectives but also influence cultural transmission, resilience strategies, and the evolving dynamics within the community over time. We navigate through the narratives

of trauma, resilience, and adaptation, weaving together the voices of individuals whose stories illuminate the intricate intersections of historical legacies and contemporary challenges within the Timor－Leste diaspora.

Research Method

In the pursuit of unraveling the intricate narratives woven into the fabric of historical trauma and forced migration, this ethnographic study unfolds in the heart of Belu Regency, West Timor (also renown as East Tenggara Timur Province － NTT), particularly in Kabuna Village. The selection of Belu Regency as the primary location is grounded in its historical significance as a haven for Timor－Leste's diaspora, those who sought refuge amidst the tumultuous events surrounding the 1999 referendum. The nuances of cultural dynamics, economic challenges, and the evolving role of digital technology come to life against the backdrop of this locale, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the lived experiences within this community.

The methodological approach involves extensive participant observation, allowing us to become an integral part of the community. Through engagement in daily activities, and communal events, we seek to gain insights into the intricacies of cultural practices, social structures, and the intergenerational transmission of narratives related to historical trauma. This immersive approach enables a holistic understanding of the community's dynamics beyond mere verbal exchanges, capturing the unspoken elements that contribute to the fabric of their lived experiences. The temporality of our ethnographic study spans from June to August 2022. This timeframe aligns with the rhythm of community events, festivals, and seasonal variations that influence the daily lives of the diaspora. Furthermore, the selected duration allows for the exploration of how the community navigates the challenges posed by the COVID－19 pandemic, providing a contemporary layer to our investigation.

Interviews, both structured and semi－structured, were conducted with community members and individuals representing various age groups. These conversations will serve as a cornerstone for capturing personal narratives, perspectives on historical events, and insights into the impact of forced migration on individual and collective identities. The interviews will be conducted in a culturally sensitive manner, respecting local customs and traditions, and translated when necessary to ensure accurate representation of voices. Additionally, socia media experience will complement traditional methods, acknowledging the role of digital technology in shaping contemporary experiences. The use of smartphones and social media platforms will be explored as avenues for expression, connection, and adaptation within the diaspora.

From Exodus to Digital Challenges: Navigating Trauma and COVID-19 in West Timor

This passage seeks to unravel the narrative of the exodus journey undertaken by former East Timorese residents, particularly during the 1999 exodus to NTT, Indonesia, amidst the East Timor referendum. We came across Fransisco Bere, commonly known as Sikitu, who is a 41 year old adherent of the Catholic faith residing in Wesasuit, Kabuna Village. He, a high school graduate currently employed as a farmer and motorbike taxi service provider, provides valuable insights into the complexities of this historical migration. Beyond documenting details of the exodus, we also aim to glean insights into the post－exodus lives of citizens from former East Timor.

Sikitu's journey began at the age of 17 when his father, a civil servant (PNS), invited him to evacuate to NTT. Fearing the imminent civil war, he, having just completed high school and without a family of his own, joined his father in this

migration. The decision to move to NTT was rooted in the perceived safety of the region. Despite his family's unanimous decision to evacuate, Sikitu's brothers returned to their homeland during the refugee repatriation process. In contrast, Sikitu remains in NTT with his father, who, due to his civil service status, cannot return to Timor－Leste without jeopardizing his employment prospects in the newly independent country.

Sikitu's recollections of the East Timor referendum in 1999 are marked by indelible memories of daily clashes and the pervasive specter of death. The tumultuous atmosphere, punctuated by frequent misunderstandings with anti－autonomy factions, often escalated into the perilous potential for murder. In this volatile environment, Sikitu's father found himself wrongly accused of being a militia member, a harrowing fate shared by other children whose fathers held positions in civil service, including police and soldiers. The confluence of political tensions and the accusations cast upon those associated with civil service further underscores the complexity and danger that defined this period in East Timor's history. Sikitu explained: "We didn't know specifically (didn't recognize who the individuals were), we just went to see and found people lying on the ground."

Had been young at that time, he expressed fear when questioned about whether he had ever witnessed murder tragedies directly. He refrained from engaging in altercations with those (pro－independence) individuals as he was considered a child. He only knew that there were people engaged in violent clashes due to political differences. Furthermore, he notes that the incident has led to a rift between him and his friends due to differing views. He emphasized the trauma stemming from the conflict highlights the irony that those who were pro－independence, despite advocated for freedom, were responsible for committing violence against their own relatives and brought severe trauma.

The haunting memory of this tragedy has significantly impacted Sikitu's psychological well－being. In the presence of crowds, He instinctively steers clear, haunted by the traumatic events he endured. This aversion continues to manifest in Sikitu's life in NTT, where, for instance, during gatherings of factions, organizations, or in festive atmospheres with intoxicated individuals, He invariably opts to avoid such situations. Even in his initial year in NTT, he struggled with sleep, tormented by the fear of conflict and clashes. He has taken steps to overcome his emotional struggles by actively seeking solace in companionship and engaging in diversionary activities. In this sense, he attempts to alleviate his trauma by engaging in conversations with friends and seeking entertainment to divert his thoughts from the painful events surrounding East Timor's separation from Indonesia. Activities like gambling and playing billiards serve as outlets for him, offering moments of enjoyment and the chance to connect with many friends. These activities provide a temporary reprieve from the haunting memories of the past, as he expressed: "I can chat with friends while gambling. It's not a significant financial loss, as the stakes are only one thousand rupiah. It's just a way to relieve stress."

Upon arriving in NTT, Sikitu's family experienced a decline in economic status, despite his father's position as a civil servant. Leaving East Timor without any belongings, his family faced economic hardships, grappling with the aftermath of the forced migration. As we addressed the psychological toll on former East Timorese, he highlighted the absence of psychological assistance from the Indonesian government or the catholic church to aid in healing trauma. Notably, such support was sporadic from local non－governmental organizations (NGOs). The assistance was primarily manifested in logistical aid, particularly food to alleviate hunger. He also pointed out that his

extended families played a limited role in addressing individual trauma. He expressed: "You feel it all yourself, those who are strong still survive, those who are not strong go crazy. There were a lot of crazy people here at that time." During their time in East Timor, nearly all catholic churches were pro−independence, and discussions primarily centered around the topic of independence. Conversely, in West Timor, He received spiritual encouragement to confront challenges, emphasizing the importance of overcoming divisive opinions. He acknowledged that this spiritual support had a positive impact on him. "Here we are united, there are no pros and cons," he reminisced, reflecting on his active involvement in the church in 1999.

Furthermore, He elaborated on the political dynamics in East Timor, noting that children of legal voting age are directed towards political participation, depending on their affiliations. Hanging out with pro−autonomy friends might lead to a perspective against Timor Leste's independence. "When you spend time with pro−autonomy friends, you're taught that Timor Leste should not become independent. However, if you associate with pro−independence friends, you learn how we can achieve independence and form our own country without any interventions," explained Sikitu, who maintains friendships with individuals from both perspectives.

Past experiences have undoubtedly left him feeling mentally and emotionally vulnerable in the present. In East Timor, a system existed wherein if parents were civil servants, one of their children could automatically follow suit, benefitting from what was termed as the "parent's share." The term refers to a common practice in East Timor where children of civil servants were entitled to recruitment privilege. During this period, when all the centers of progress were in East Timor, Sikitu and his family enjoyed a relatively comfortable life. However, the eruption of conflict drastically altered their circumstances. The forced exodus led them to abandon all possessions−houses, land, and money. This profound loss continues to evoke feelings of weakness and regret in him to this day. He often reflects on the alternate trajectory he could have experienced had the 1999 incident not occurred. As a high school graduate at that time, he had envisioned the possibility of becoming a civil servant, a prospect that was disrupted by the tumultuous events of that year. Among East Timorese, the perception of civil servant as "prestigious" has gained popularity due to its association with economic stability and elevated social status. The role is also seen as a pathway to personal advancement. "If East Timor doesn't become independent, we can secure employment. Why don't the authorities there ever speak positively about defending Timor Leste?" Sikitu expressed regret, not for the exodus itself but because Timor Leste gained independence.

During this stage of the conflict, all of his family members experienced stress due to the declining economy. The only stable source of support was their father, a civil servant, as finding employment was challenging. He recounted that, despite having completed high school, he and his siblings were unable to apply for jobs before they had to flee. In Timor Leste, Sikitu's parents had envisioned a future for their children, but those dreams were shattered upon their escape to West Timor. The economic downturn, personal problems, and the abrupt disruption of their plans created significant stress for Sikitu's family.

This emotional state stemmed from Sikitu's inability to work, leaving him dependent on his parents. To alleviate the stress, his parents offered reassurance, stating, "We can't reclaim the things we left behind (house, land), so others will take them. We must let them go". He also mentioned that his family house was luxurious, with ample land, a cow, and several motorcycles were left behind. Unfortunately, there was also no

time to retrieve the money from the drawer, as the urgency to secure the children took precedence amid the chaotic circumstances.

This transitional phase in Sikitu's life led to an intricate interplay of socio－economic dynamics. Since their initial arrival, land ownership is not common among most East Timorese refugees. His absence of land ownership was assuaged by the generosity of a local resident who allowed him to use a piece of land without conferring ownership rights, instead granting only managerial control. This arrangement exemplifies the communal nature of land access, transcending individual ownership and highlighting the importance of shared resources within the community. Moreover, the connection between Sikitu and the local resident of West Timor goes beyond mere land arrangements. It is characterized as a brotherhood, a bond not determined by blood relations but solidified by a shared linguistic identity—specifically, the Kemak language. This linguistic bond acts as a poignant marker of collective identity, weaving a resilient social thread that ties together individuals with shared cultural experiences.

As the sands of time flowed, Sikitu took a significant step in 2003 by tying the knot with Agnes, a woman hailing from West Timor. This marital union evolved into more than a mere legal commitment; it became a haven of solace, a sanctuary where the gentle balm of companionship and affection began to mend the deep－seated wounds within his soul. This union not only symbolized a shared journey between two individuals but also signified a profound emotional healing for him, offering the transformative power of genuine love and connection. In Agnes, he discovered a partner whose presence and care played a vital role in the gradual restoration of his internal well－being, marking a poignant chapter in his resilience amid the complexities of his past experiences.

We invited Agnes to join the conversation, and initially, she seemed shy to share. However, as the discussion progressed, she became more open and willing to share her stories. Following his marriage to Agnes and the arrival of their children, he stressed gradually diminished. However, a new challenge emerged, with economic difficulties arising from traditional customs, particularly the significant financial obligations associated with cultural traditions. While non－compliance with these traditions did not incur financial, there were social consequences, including familial ostracization and judgment. To tackle this, Agnes then sought employment as a migrant worker in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Upon her return, she secured capital and used it to establish a modest kiosk with a tin roof. In such a way, the prevalence of East Timorese women becoming migrant workers has become widespread, a phenomenon triggered by the challenging economic conditions and pervasive poverty in the region. "We are not explicitly asked to pay money, but we face social judgment," Sikitu explained. Agnes added, "The expression is akin to losing face, and when everyone else has it, but I don't, it brings shame."

We further delved into the customs Agnes referred to, seeking specific case examples. Both she and Sikitu highlighted a poignant instance related to death, recounting an incident when Agnes' brother passed away. Despite their financial hardship, they were compelled to pay a death fee of 500,000 rupiah. Inability to meet this demand resulted in being disregarded by other relatives, and the village, imposed sanctions that affected their self－esteems. Sikitu, expressing the stress induced by such customs, and provided another illustrative example:

> "For instance, when someone passes away, like my recent experience when my father－in－law died, we were required to slaughter a cow and set aside 7 million. Failing to meet this obligation results in being disregarded. I was seen as a son－

in－law who failed to fulfill his duty, and this is the expectation. Despite the circumstances, one is expected to make the necessary effort."

In a similar vein, when he brought a smaller cow, it was rejected, and he was asked to take it back. This situation caused immense stress for him, prompting his immediate concern about acquiring money, regardless of the potential debt incurred. He perceives the customs revolve around issues of shame and prestige if he cannot fulfill these cultural expectations. This sense of obligation to adhere to customs at any expense, is believed to hinder individual development. According to him and Agnes, the significance of self－esteem is paramount in the culture of NTT people.

The challenges of meeting cultural expectations are further exemplified by Sikitu's experience with a rejected cow, adding another layer to the complexities of navigating these traditions. We then explored whether the challenges faced by Sikitu were temporary while customs persisted throughout a lifetime. Could these customs become an enduring source of stress? He responded by suggesting that one must simply live with it, as customs are irremovable. To cope, his family engages in discussions to manage expenses and allocate funds, maintaining separate funds for customs and other needs, such as their children's education.

However, in the midst of profound trauma and economic challenges, he found renewed enthusiasm in 2011 through economic assistance. During this period, he received support from the private sector, particularly a dealer, which facilitated his access to a motorcycle through a small down payment. Despite the substantial deposit, this opportunity motivated him as he purchased a motorcycle to provide taxi services to generate income. Prior to this assistance, he had been unemployed from the time of his arrival until 2011.

Moreover, the discussion extended to uncovering how the economic strains exacerbated by the pandemic further intertwined with the intricacies of fulfilling these cultural norms. Amidst these economic challenges, Sikitu's family navigated the hardships brought by the pandemic, exacerbated by the stall's lack of buyers and further complicated by the passing of a family member. In the initial days of the Covid－19 outbreak, he grappled with anxiety triggered by videos depicting people succumbing to the disease. Consequently, he and his wife made the decision to close their stall, opting to decline customers out of fear of virus transmission. He and Agnes, while sharing their pandemic experiences, intertwined moments of laughter with recounted worries, including panic－induced hand sanitizer spraying and meticulous drying of their possessions. At this time, they acquired information about the pandemic and massive dead toll through television, YouTube, and discussions at the village office. He acknowledged relying on YouTube regularly to stay updated on pandemic－related information.

They found themselves confronted with an added layer of stress induced by the forced closure of their stall. This unexpected halt to their business operations not only exacerbated their financial worries but also heightened the strain on their overall well－being. Concurrently, intertwined with these economic challenges, they navigated the intricate web of traditional demands, adding a complex dimension to their already burdensome circumstances. Their economic sustenance relied on kiosks and motorbike taxis, yet during that period, the kiosks remained devoid of visitors, and the operation of motorbike taxis was hindered by social distancing measures. They also experienced heightened stress from technology, as the daily influx of information primarily focused on Covid－19－related fatalities. When we questioned about the comparative trauma between Covid－19 and past conflicts, the we sought to understand the nuanced impact

of these distinct challenges on Sikitu and Agnes. "Each presents its own trauma. In the past, it was overshadowed by death (due to conflict), and now it seems to be happening again," said Sikitu.

During the pandemic－induced downturn, the couple disclosed that they availed themselves of a credit offer from a bank, providing the necessary capital for re－establishing their business. Their existing economic streams involve revenue generated from kiosk, income derived from motorbike taxis, and proceeds from small gardens. Amid pandemic－induced stress, they sought solace by spending time in the garden with their closest family members. While engaging with family in WhatsApp groups, they discovered that such interactions did not significantly alleviate stress due to the prevalence of sad news, hoaxes, and bothersome WhatsApp statuses circulating.

Despite their awareness of unreliable sources and hoaxes, they humorously pondered why they were easily perturbed by such news. They acknowledged engaging in online arguments, particularly in WhatsApp groups, with individuals spreading hoaxes about Covid－19 infections near their village. In response, he reprimanded those individuals, urging them to share positive content. We inferred that their fear induced by hoax news could impede their daily activities, including earning a livelihood. Agnes recounted creating a WhatsApp story encouraging the public to adhere to health protocols and practice social distancing. They also utilized WhatsApp for communication with relatives in Timor Leste, exchanging information about the pandemic's situation and offering mutual support. During the pandemic, the catholic church also emerged as a crucial source of support. The priest's presence during Mass, emphasizing resilience against excessive fear while adhering to health protocols, left a lasting impact on the couple. Despite residents' limited cellphone options, churches eschew online services, opting for regulated in－person worship, with the priest conducting home visits.

As he shares entertaining content, promotes COVID－19 precautions, and emphasizes positive interactions on social media, cell phones become instrumental in stress reduction. For Agnes, the utilization of online platforms for business faced challenges during the pandemic due to restricted face－to－face transactions. She expresses her ambition to propel her business forward through ongoing online marketing, highlighting the need for improved and more affordable internet connectivity in West Timor. In remote areas like West Timor, the condition of internet infrastructure often poses challenges, marked by limited accessibility, slower speeds, and higher costs. The geographical remoteness and rugged terrain contribute to difficulties in establishing robust internet connections, hindering the seamless flow of information and hampering economic activities.

Navigating Challenges: Conflict Experiences, Social Media Use, and Connectivity Struggles Among East Timorese Youth

This passage aims to explore the conflict experience and the role of social media use among young people from East Timorese groups in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT). The informants, Joanna Dos Santos and Sarah, provide valuable insights. Joanna, a 28－year－old woman working as a Kabuna Village official, holds a bachelor's degree in education and follows the Catholic faith. In addition to discussing social media, we sought information about challenges in Kabuna Village through interviews with Joanna and Sarah. Before delving into village issues, the researcher inquired about the background and identity of the sources. Both informants disclosed being born in Timor Leste before the onset of the conflict. Sarah hails from Dili, Timor Leste, while Joanna was born in Bobonaro District. Sarah's father serves as a civil servant, and her mother is a

housewife. In contrast, Joanna's father was a soldier, and her mother was a housewife. The 1999 conflict in East Timor occurred when Theyna were approximately 4−5 years old. Despite their young age at the time, Sarah vividly recalls certain events, as does Joanna. The recollections of both participants include memories of clashes and the sight of refugees boarding a truck for evacuation from Timor Leste to Atambua at night. In a quiet moment with us, Sarah, followed by Joanna, expressed their emotions about the 1999 conflict with a single word "scared". When probed further about the nature of their fear, Joanna responded in a subdued voice, underscoring the deep impact of the conflict on their memories.

Joan conveyed to us her profound fear and concern regarding her father's safety while serving as a soldier. Consequently, when she fled to Atambua, she did so solely with her mother, as her father was on duty. In contrast, Sarah, reflecting on that period, expressed that she was too young to fully comprehend the situation. Although she experienced fear, she couldn't articulate the specific reasons behind it. She recollected observing the commotion of people in trucks during the evacuation but clarified that she never witnessed any direct acts of violence. However, she did hear gunshots from her house, situated not far from the main road. It appeared that Joan's level of anxiety during the events surpassed Sarah's experiences. When we asked whether her parents had discussed the actual conditions during the conflict, Sarah revealed that her parents never broached the topic. Instead, they shared more about their own youth in Timor Leste. Sarah admitted to rarely seeking information about the conflict herself.

In 1999, Sarah's initial escape from East Timor led her family to seek refuge in Matabuik Elementary School in Indonesia. After their stay there, they relocated to the Chinese cemetery before ultimately being advised to return to a refugee camp. At that time, Sarah was unaware of the circumstances prompting these movements. However, the advent of social media platforms like TikTok has allowed her to delve into and comprehend the events from her past. Through TikTok, Sarah uncovered that the constant relocations were a result of the conflict between Indonesia and East Timor, driven by East Timor's desire for sovereign secession. Turning our attention to Joan, considering her father's military occupation, we inquired whether her family ever tried to clarify the circumstances surrounding their relocations. Joan explained that as a child, she lacked a clear understanding of the ongoing conditions. Upon further investigation by the researchers into whether they were aware of the reasons behind their movements, both confirmed their lack of knowledge. They stressed that their awareness was limited to the fact that they moved in response to their parents due to the clashes in Timor Leste.

A prevailing emotion they distinctly remembered from these forced evacuations was a profound sense of sadness. "It's disheartening because you end up being separated from your family. There's one here, and there's one there," shared Joan. "The sorrow stems from the necessity of abandoning everything. I only managed to gather my clothes before relocating with my family. Some remain here, while others stay there. If we were there, we could be living in our own home. However, being here, we have to adapt. Obtaining clean water poses challenges, making even simple meals a struggle. Resources are limted, including access to bathrooms.," explained Sarah.

They expressed that being in such a situation induced stress, a realization that grew more apparent with age. They noted that life as refugees presented greater challenges compared to their earlier years in the east when everything was readily available. The transition to being refugees felt like starting from scratch — acquiring land, building a new home, and essentially restarting what they had previously accomplished. When They

arrived in Indonesia at the age of 4－5, they hadn't yet started school. Their formal education began at the age of 6. The hurdle they encountered as refugees upon entering school was primarily language－related. In East Timor, they spoke the Tetun, while schools in Indonesia primarily used Indonesian. This linguistic transition posed difficulties, considering Indonesian was perceived as challenging. Additionally, they occasionally faced mockery from the local community, particularly in terms of language differences.

According to Them, when they were displaced, they attended the same institutions as non－refugee individuals. This situation sometimes led to instances of bullying, particularly in discussions highlighting linguistic differences. People from the East Timor often exhibit a tendency to drop the letter "G" at the end of words where it should be included, and conversely, they may add the letter "G" where it isn't needed. Sarah illustrated this with the word "Makan," (eat) commonly transformed into "Makang" by Eastern speakers. Joan provided the example of "Kijang," (deer) which might be spelled as "Kijan." These language distinctions became a source of amusement between refugees and non－refuges. Initially, they felt awkward about these jokes, but with time, they embraced the learning process and adapted, especially concerning the use of the letter "G" in sentences. Moreover, They noted that during their youth as refugees in Indonesia, they did not experience discriminatory treatment. However, they emphasized that if they were to return to the Eastern region, they might encounter discrimination with this mockery. "Wow, this is aitarak!" "Aitarak" is a term used for individuals who departed from East Timor and opted to reside in Indonesia. Literally, the term "Aitarak" can be translated as traitor. "Oh those traitorous children!" said Sarah

The designation of traitor is only applied when individuals like Them return to the East timor. However, while residing in Indonesia, such labels are not bestowed upon them. Interestingly, They still maintain family ties in East Timor, communicating through platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook. Despite these connections, visiting relatives in East Timor requires caution due to lingering sentiments towards those who changed citizenship by opting for Indonesia. We were intrigued by this information shared by Them. The question arose: How do people in East Timor identify those who, like Sarah and Joan, chose to relocate? Through their's accounts, it became apparent that in East Timor, people generally have a close－knit community where individuals are well－known to one another. Consequently, when faces are perceived as unfamiliar, suspicion arises, and they may be considered "traitors" for choosing a different citizenship. Throughout their journey from East Timor to Indonesia, they faced considerable challenges, particularly concerning language differences that made them targets for bullying. To alleviate their emotional strain, they confided in their respective parents, who encouraged them to persevere in learning and adapting.

Other than that, they came to reside in Kabuna when their family was directed to relocate to a refugee camp in the area. At that time, Kabuna had designated refugee camps established on vacant land. Although the move brought about a sense of sadness due to the separation from their close family, They, being very young at the time, didn't feel a strong cultural attachment. Their sense of comfort during the evacuation stemmed from the presence of their parents. Notably, moving with all the residents in their neighborhood complex provided a sense of security. Despite not speaking Indonesian, they found solace in the fact that they could still converse with some friends in their native language, Tetun. The use of Tetum language remains deeply ingrained in their lives, serving as their daily means of communication at home. Even now, their parents

encounter challenges communicating in Indonesian, necessitating the continued use of Tetum for effective communication.

Despite this situation, they are actively engaged in local customs. During traditional activities, they are obligated to contribute donations from their savings, whether in the form of money, traditional cloth, or other items. These donations are presented to the event organizer. Furthermore, they play a role in organizing and assisting with the execution of these events. As East Timorese, they expressed the profound difficulty they faced in securing employment after graduating in 2018. Prior to being hired as Kabuna Village officials, Sarah disclosed that she applied to schools, banks, and underwent civil service and state－owned enterprise tests in late 2018 and 2019. With a bachelor's degree in education, Sarah primarily sought positions in educational institutions. Unfortunately, despite numerous applications, no institution extended a job offer to Sarah. Joan, who also holds a bachelor's degree in education, faced a similar challenge. She applied to five schools, took the civil service test, and attempted the state－owned enterprise test but did not succeed.

We aimed to discern the factors contributing to the challenges encountered in their job searches. Despite possessing commendable GPAs, with Sarah at 3.3 and Joan at 3.4, a significant factor leading to their rejections was the saturation of existing teaching staff in the schools to which they applied. Furthermore, the transition to the integrated 2013 curriculum posed a hurdle for Sarah, a biology education graduate, in teaching integrated science. Joan encountered similar obstacles, with schools indicating that teaching positions were already filled. Their job search spanned approximately three years, further complicated by the pandemic conditions in 2020. Closures and the shift to online learning made applying for school positions exceptionally difficult. After an extended job search, Joan secured a position as a Kabuna Village official in 2018. In contrast, Sarah continued to face challenges until March 2021 when she was eventually hired as an employee in Kabuna Village. It is noteworthy that both Sarah and Joan, in their pursuit of employment at Kabuna Village, underwent a rigorous application process, which included entrance tests. Reflecting on this arduous period, both individuals acknowledged feelings of sadness, annoyance, and disappointment that permeated their experiences during the job search. "We studied diligently, eager to transition straight into the workforce. Upon returning home, we immediately started the search, thinking, wow, with a bachelor degree, finding a job should be easy. Little did we know, it's not always the case," remarked Sarah.

In the past, they harbored aspirations of becoming civil servants. However, due to the challenging nature of securing employment, they no longer entertain that expectation. Based on their experiences, Joan has lost the desire to apply to schools. Sarah echoed Joan's sentiments, expressing a reluctance to apply to schools due to the difficulty of being accepted as teachers. Given the option, both of them would prefer working in private institutions. With regard of challenges faced by Them in securing employment, we explored the possibility of discrimination between ex－refugees and local residents. However, based on the information provided, the difficulty in finding a job is attributed to the fulfillment of teaching staff quotas at schools, rather than any discrimination.

Subsequently, the discussion shifted to the utilization of social media and communication technology. Researchers inquired about when They began using communication tools. They revealed that they began using cell phones in 2013, with a regular Nokia phone at that time. Not equipped with smartphone features, these ordinary phones allowed only calling and sending SMS to family and friends, including those in

Timor Leste. Despite the higher SMS rates during that period, both They highlighted the significant improvement in communication facilitated by the internet and WhatsApp. The availability of these platforms has considerably reduced the cost of sending messages compared to the earlier, more expensive SMS rates.

Before the advent of WhatsApp and the internet, whenever they missed their family, they would attempt to travel to East Timor. Over time, Sarah has changed her cellphone four times, while Joan has gone through five. The replacements were primarily due to the wear and tear of the devices. Initially purchased by their parents, both Sarah and Joan acknowledge that owning a cellphone has both positive and negative impacts. On the positive side, it facilitates communication and broadens the information they can access. Conversely, the negative impact arises when they find themselves procrastinating and delaying work due to distraction. Smartphones have made job searching more accessible for Them through social media and job groups. On platforms like Facebook, they frequently come across job vacancies, as well as offers for positions at state－owned enterprises or civil service tests on TikTok. In terms of mental health, having a cellphone serves as a source of entertainment, reducing anxiety for Them. They watch funny videos or Korean dramas, finding solace in entertainment when facing challenges in their job search. Sometimes, they share content with fellow job seekers on WhatsApp or Facebook. Although Facebook and TikTok are their primary choices, Instagram is seldom used in Kabuna.

During the pandemic, the reliance on cellphones increased, especially for information related to COVID－19. Initially, they believed most information on social media, only later discovering discrepancies and misinformation. The fear of infection and death during the pandemic led to changes in their behavior, with Sarah staying home more often to minimize the risk of transmission. Joan, who used to visit her garden daily, limited her outdoor interactions due to the pandemic. To cope with free time during the pandemic, both They turned to platforms like TikTok and YouTube. TikTok, being a well－known application at the time, became a frequent choice, while YouTube served as a learning resource for Sarah when seeking tutorials. Both utilized social media to gather information about COVID－19, such as statistics on infections and deaths.

We then inquired about the source's activities on TikTok. Specifically, whether they only consume content or also contribute by creating content. They revealed that they occasionally create TikTok content themselves. Sarah mentioned having 45 followers on TikTok. Typically, the content they generate involves dancing or other engaging activities. In terms of using social media to connect with peers in East Timor, they explained that they utilize platforms like Facebook to inquire about updates. They inquire about their friends' marital status, the number of children they have, and occasionally receive invitations to visit East Timor and meet friends or relatives. Additionally, their friends sometimes request them to purchase and send goods to East Timor. They are most active on Facebook from dusk to night, especially since they are currently without a job. During the day, they access Facebook only a few times. The signal in Kabuna Village is generally good, as providers like XL and Telkomsel have coverage.

On Facebook, Sarah has around 400 friends, including family, coworkers, and new acquaintances. On the other hand, Joan disclosed having more friends on Facebook, totaling around 2,500. The predominant content they share on Facebook is photos. Over time, Sarah grew more cautious in approving friend requests. She noted an increase in fake accounts sending unsolicited greetings through private messages, making them uncomfortable. Consequently, they became more discerning in accepting friend requests.

Alongside their personal connections, they also joined various groups on Facebook, including job search groups and buying－and－selling communities. The latter, particularly focused on livestock transactions such as pig sales, proved successful. These buying and selling groups serve as a local marketplace among residents in the Atambua area, and both They acknowledged actively participating in these groups. "So when we post something for sale, people come and check it out, at least within the group," Sarah explained. "Likewise, I use it for selling, and sometimes for buying too. But I'm more into buying, like cell phones sometimes," Joan added.

During the pandemic, Sarah revealed that she utilized Facebook buying and selling groups for purchasing clothes. In addition to social media, both Sarah and Joan mentioned using e－commerce platforms like Shopee and Lazada on several occasions. However, due to the perceived high shipping costs exceeding IDR 50,000 on these applications when sending goods to NTT, they opted for TikTok Shop, which was considered more affordable and even offered free shipping at times. Occasionally, they were able to acquire shopping vouchers through TikTok Shop.

Regarding their engagement in job search groups, they primarily acted as observers, not actively posting but rather monitoring the provided information. They occasionally inquired about job vacancies actively posted in the group, particularly those related to teaching positions. However, due to the vacancies being located far from Belu, such as Kupang, Malacca, and Flores, they declined as they were unwilling to travel too far without parental permission. Furthermore, they emphasized the role of technology, particularly smartphones, in reducing stress during the pandemic. The devices were instrumental in fact－checking information, assuaging worries about the severity of Covid－19, and reinforcing messages of health and safety to friends and family. They actively shared Covid－19 alert posts with friends and family, both locally and in East Timor, utilizing gadgets and the internet to disseminate information and raise awareness about the pandemic.

Despite being users of the WhatsApp application, they acknowledge feeling uncomfortable when they come across friends' statuses that excessively detail personal problems. They also express being occasionally offended by satirical statuses, even if these aren't necessarily directed at them. Additionally, they note feeling bothered by friends' WhatsApp statuses related to selling, as the abundance of these statuses can be overwhelming. They feel disturbed by this, especially since they infrequently post statuses on WhatsApp, typically only after going for a walk. Sarah shared an example of posting a status on WhatsApp to extend greetings for East Timor's Independence Day. "Happy Independence day." Sarah wrote on her Whatsapp status. As a result, sometimes, relatives or family members from East Timor respond to these statuses with expressions of gratitude. They acknowledge that, at present, they have never received negative responses when extending congratulations for East Timor's Independence Day. However, they do acknowledge that such negative reactions did occur in the past. For instance, there were instances where individuals commented on their statuses, labeling them as "traitors." Despite feeling uncomfortable and angry, they opted not to engage in conflict and refrained from responding to those comments.

Finally, similar to Sikitu and Agnes, who highlighted the crucial role of internet connectivity in their lives, Joan and Sarah stressed that it is imperative for the government to take proactive measures to enhance the quality of internet connections. In an era where digital communication and online activities are integral to various aspects of daily life, an improved and reliable internet infrastructure would not only benefit individuals like Sikitu, Agnes, Sarah and Joan but also contribute significantly to the

overall progress and development of the community. Recognizing the transformative impact of robust internet connectivity, governmental initiatives aimed at infrastructure enhancement and technological advancements are essential to ensure equitable access and propel societal advancement.

Conclusion

This ethnographic research offers a comprehensive journey into the lives of individuals from Timor－Leste, shedding light on the profound impact of historical trauma stemming from the forced migration of 1999. Through a focused examination of the life trajectories of former residents spanning multiple generations, the study unravels the intricate interplay of trauma, economic challenges, and the transformative influence of digital technology in the context of their refuge in Nusa Tenggara Timur, Indonesia. The narratives captured in this research unveil the coping mechanisms adopted by these individuals as they grapple with the enduring scars of conflict. The exploration extends beyond the historical lens, delving into the contemporary challenges faced by this community, particularly in the throes of the COVID－19 pandemic.

Crucially, the study highlights the dynamic role played by digital technology, encompassing smartphones and social media platforms, in shaping the intricate life trajectories of the subjects. The digital realm emerges as not only a means of communication but a vital component in their coping mechanisms and adaptation strategies. The nuanced exploration of these elements contributes valuable insights into the multifaceted dimensions of post－traumatic experiences, providing a deeper understanding of how technology has become an integral part of their lives. As we conclude this research, it becomes evident that the stories uncovered here are not just individual narratives but a collective tapestry of resilience, adaptation, and the evolving dynamics of a community marked by historical upheavals. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on trauma, migration, and the role of technology in shaping the post－conflict experiences of communities, offering a nuanced perspective that goes beyond the immediate aftermath of conflict history.

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