

Chapter 5

Refugee settlements as social spaces

On Saturday afternoons, women sellers spread their produce on empty 10-kilogram rice bags outside the Saint Bertilla Catholic Church, located at the opening of Atkamba camp at East Awin. They offered fresh pig meat cut into portions, smoked *couscous* carcass, raw and cooked *gomo* nuts from the breadfruit tree, unshelled peanuts tied by their stalks into bunches, red chillis and ginger, taro, cassava and sweet potato, a variety of greens, a dozen types of banana, pineapples and *soursop*. On one particular Saturday while stopping to buy eggs from a seller, I found myself standing next to Cecilia. She introduced the egg seller to me as Angelina, her daughter's grandmother. That is, Angelina the seller was Cecilia's own mother. I had spent a lot of time with Cecilia cooking and eating, but she had never mentioned her 'mama' Angelina, and I had never met her. But most curious was the fact that Angelina appeared to be about the same age as Cecilia herself—about thirty-five years old. When I queried her, she explained that Angelina's face, stature and body movement resembled those of Cecilia's mother in 1992: 'Mama appears as my own mother did when I last saw her.' Cecilia's daughter called Angelina 'Nenek' or grandmother, and sometimes Angelina's daughter stayed with Cecilia. The relationship between the women was signified by exchange. At the market, Cecilia—who received wages as a teacher—always purchased vegetables from Angelina. She paid with high denomination coins, and refused change. Angelina sometimes gave Cecilia a billum or string bag laden with produce from her own extensive garden. When Cecilia occasionally bought bulk rice from town, she gave Angelina several kilos. Rice was a luxury item at East Awin, and most people could only afford to buy salt, and occasionally peanut oil to supplement their diet of sweet potato, bananas and greens.

Cecilia and Angelina have generated a kind of 'fictive kinship': a relationship formed out of Angelina's physical resemblance to Cecilia's mother. The name that West Papuans give to this practice is *tukar muka* which means literally 'exchanging faces'. Leonardo, whose fictive kinship is elaborated below, explained the practice: 'I see that person living close to me in the same way as I see the one living far.' Exchanging faces is not specific to the condition of exile. It may be practised when a person experiences the absence of a close relative due to death, or if they are outside their place of origin. A fictive kin relation may be more enduring than the relation with the absent person, and may continue after the return of the absent relative. Leonardo outlined the process of exchanging faces. If by chance a person meets someone whose physical

appearance resembles an absent or deceased relative, they may approach that person and invite them to take on the role of the absent relative. Next they will invite the person to eat, perhaps offering small gifts before revealing their intention: 'I see you the same as X. I want to take you as X.' It may be a moment of intense emotion. At East Awin, exchanging faces was described as something many practised, recognised by most people and possessing a reciprocal or exchange character. If a person accepts another's identification of them, both assume the obligations of their respective roles. For example, a woman recognising a man as her maternal uncle will assume the role of his niece.

Leonardo saw the features of his deceased younger sister in his neighbour Sofia. After exchanging faces, Leonardo used 'younger sister' to address Sofia, and 'brother-in-law' to address Sofia's husband. In return, Sofia called Leonardo 'older brother', and her children addressed him as 'maternal uncle'. Leonardo's identification of Sofia as his deceased younger sister, and Sofia's acceptance of this role meant that they held expectations of one another as siblings. As his sister's brother, Leonardo had also taken on the responsibility of maternal uncle to Sofia's children. Among Muyu and north coast and island West Papuans, the maternal uncle receives bride-price payment for his sister, and contributes to the bride-price payments for his sister's sons, although both of these exchanges may involve several other contributors and recipients. At East Awin, the role of maternal uncle could also be approximated pragmatically, that is, without attention to physical resemblance. For example, one man's bride-price was provided by his father's sister and her husband in the absence of other relatives at East Awin. In Irian Jaya, the payment was acknowledged by the man's parents and uncles who then returned the payment to relatives of the paternal aunt.

The practice of exchanging faces at East Awin creates ties between non-kin in the same and different camps. Appadurai's theorising of locality further extends an explanation of the effect of fictive kinship.¹ East Awin is a social formation where families (excepting Muyu) tend to be nuclear, because only the able-bodied could flee. In a situation where previously extended families are no longer intact, people may intentionally or incidentally establish fictive kinship. The formation of these relations creates a new social space which may in turn generate other social spaces, as the relation between the two individuals extends into their respective kin, neighbour and enemy groupings. Through Angelina, Cecilia has entrée into Atkamba camp, and vice versa, which generates contexts for new social spaces.

The production of 'new social spaces' is central to Appadurai's thesis of 'locality'.² Locality resembles the sentiment of 'home' in that it describes the dimension of sociality between people. But it is the way Appadurai theorises the production of locality and what locality generates, that is distinctive. East Awin settlement can be described as a refugee grouping produced by the policy and actions of

the PNG government and UNHCR. The relocation of 4000 people to a small area in a short space of time compelled relationality as people settled themselves among others, and participated in intersecting fraternities as parents of school children, members of church congregations and Bible-reading groups, sellers or buyers in the market, patients at clinics, users of public paths, etc. The production of 'locality' can be encouraged. The establishment of five primary schools in particular locations in the settlement, compulsory enrolment of children in the school catchment, and requirement for each school to form parent representative bodies, produced a context which compelled parents to form committees. In and through this association and its fetes and civic events, opportunities for other social spaces came to be generated.

Configuration of the settlement was historical—in most cases, the camp population and camp name had simply been transplanted to East Awin from its previous location on the border. Because entire villages had fled, intact families across three generations were not uncommon in Muyu camps at East Awin. But separation had occurred in many instances where elderly and frail parents were left behind, or had returned to their *dusun* in Irian Jaya. The territorial and genealogical basis of the nine Muyu camps at East Awin contrasted other camps. Most northerners at East Awin were urban dwellers who had fled as individuals or nuclear family groups from the coastal towns of Sorong, Manokwari, Serui, Biak and Jayapura. Luther claimed that his own northerner camp Waraston functioned as a community by virtue of residents' 'urban disposition'. By this he meant that in the absence of kin, genealogically unrelated neighbours acted towards each other as kin. At Waraston, illness or death was handled by a person's neighbours and the camp generally. Alliances between northerners were initially established in the first border camp at Vanimo, where groups coalesced around two leaders from the islands of Biak and Serui. When these two groups relocated to East Awin, they were initially resettled by the administration in camps located 25 kilometres apart. Luther reckoned that the location of the camps had been predetermined by the camp administration to be at opposite ends to prevent any prospect of solidarity, thereby weakening the struggle. For his part, Luther categorised all northerners as family regardless of their politics: shared origin was more important than political persuasion.

Camps at East Awin comprised people who shared places of origin, and/or membership of the same political or religious group. Outside these alliances distrust tended to prevail. Some people's trust only extended to their immediate family. Behaviour in relation to mail is illustrative. Most people at East Awin expressed a preference for renting a post office box of their own in the distant town of Kiunga. By distant I mean that it could take at least 12 hours to navigate the rainforest path and river crossing from East Awin to Kiunga. The second-best option was to use the post office box of one's church at East Awin, or the address of a relative living in Kiunga. The least reliable option was to send and receive

mail through the camp administration's public post box, as people claimed that mail was pilfered and were reluctant to entrust the collection of their mail to anyone else. Back in Canberra I received letters from people anxiously inquiring whether I had received their mail, or whether I had sent mail that they had not received.

Muyu avoided involving themselves in business with their own clan. Rather, they preferred to ally themselves with those whose village origin was the same, but whose clan was different. None of the kiosks at East Awin were owned or operated by Muyu. According to Markus, this was because Muyu feared social envy.³ Some claimed refugeeness as an economic condition to be shared by all. Wage-earning Muyu, such as teachers or nurses, contrasted with other Muyu toiling in their gardens for a few lousy *toea*. Markus, a teacher, tried to remedy this imbalance by purchasing produce from Muyu sellers in the market despite his own extensive garden, and fulfilling requests for assistance whenever he was able.

Solidarity between Muyu refugees was based on their camp of residence at East Awin. The following incident, which occurred in the St Bertilla market at the entrance to Atkamba camp, demonstrates alliance among some Muyu based on perceived inequality. A prominent Muyu woman from Atkamba announced in the market one Saturday that women from other camps at East Awin were no longer welcome to sell their produce at St Bertilla market. Women from other camps (including Muyu camps), whose gardens were located in the vicinity of larger rivers, were able to grow large vegetables and irrigated varieties: cucumbers, broad-leafed *kangkung*, chives and snake beans. The incidental location of their gardens was providing this group with a competitive advantage over the Atkamba sellers whose gardening land was dry.

Other sellers in the market experienced exclusion for different reasons. Twelve months after Cecilia's arrival at East Awin with 100 other families from Sota, only six families remained. In the following year, Cecilia's husband also left for Irian Jaya to see for himself the fate of refugees who had returned. Explaining her sense of abandonment at this time, Cecilia used a phrase which ordinarily describes a child abandoned by its parents, or if a person has no surviving relatives:

We felt left behind like abandoned children when we recalled those people who had already returned, and at other times when there were disputes with the neighbouring camp at East Awin. We were now a very small camp and felt threatened, enclosed. So we tried not to make trouble, preferring instead to yield to others' demands. We adopted an attitude of *nai sepne* which in our language means 'just leave it'.

Cecilia's experience of living at East Awin was affected by the size of her camp in relation to neighbouring camps. It was the perception of minority that was the basis of her camp's solidarity, and their acquiescence:

When we first arrived, [we] baked cassava cakes to sell in the [East Awin] market. Because the cakes were enticing, other vendors protested that buyers were spending all of their money on our cakes and they were taking home their produce unsold. Then some of these other women copied our cakes, but buyers still bought from us and those women took their cakes home, unsold. They protested again and we thought: better we stop selling cakes than have this bitterness between us—we are only a few people here.

Northerner leaders at Waraston camp understood and promoted activities of community formation and solidarity. At their previous border camp near Vanimo, they had established a co-operative and purchased an outboard motor for fishing. At East Awin, their business operations included a passenger/freight truck operating between East Awin and the Fly River, and a motorised canoe operating between the Fly River ramp and the town of Kiunga. Profits from the truck and canoe were managed by the 'Committee for Community Prosperity'. They funded camp activities such as catering at commemorative flag-raising ceremonies, and seed grants for women's groups and family-based enterprises. These funds also supported administration (post, phone, transport) related to political business.

Everyday activity and interaction within and across camps generated a social space/s from which departure was considered as homeparting. Departures meant parting from a place where one had experienced social belonging. Casey has described the way that a place gathers things in its midst: experiences, thoughts, histories, as well as animate and inanimate entities.⁴ Repatriation of friends and relatives was viewed with disappointment, for their return was considered premature. It was also seen as the loss of loved ones from a familiar place they had shared. The song below, titled 'It's said you want to leave', recalls a person learning of the imminent departure of another, and imagines everyday life at East Awin in that person's absence. Time and place are disrupted, rendered suddenly dark by the loss. The song approaches East Awin uniquely as a homeplace from where parting occurs:

First verse: It's said you want to leave
The sun will go down
When your face no longer radiates
Our village will become dark.

Second verse: Until now you have not yet said
Don't understand the pounding of my heart
I will wait faithfully

Until your news arrives.

Chorus: Let's sit for a moment and talk

You can't leave in a rush

Don't forget the valley of East Awin

And a certain person and their affection.

To leave East Awin after burying someone close was to leave behind traces of that person's productive activity such as their garden. In the period following death, places associated with the deceased may be the subject of avoidance for Muyu, as features of the landscape 'resonate with events from the life of the deceased'.⁵ Repatriation to Irian Jaya meant that the graves of deceased family members at East Awin would be left derelict. Burial of family members established an enduring connection with a place previously considered both foreign and temporary. Burial made refugees' relation to East Awin ambiguous.

A PNG government regulation prescribed the public cemetery at East Awin as the official place of burial. In the past, the camp administration had provided transport of the coffin from the deceased person's home to the cemetery. But since the decline of government services, relatives had begun to bury their dead nearby: next to their houses, and on the perimeter of churches. I was told: 'Here, everyone is determined in spite of the consequences to bury their dead beside their house. If the deceased is beloved, the person's family will not permit the grave to be far from their house.' People were reluctant to bury the dead in the public cemetery because rumours circulated that pigs from the neighbouring camp roamed freely, and rooted out fresh burial sites. It was also pragmatic to bury nearby. The cemetery was too far to carry a coffin if there was no transport, and a nearby grave was more readily cared for, and more easily identifiable in the event of exhumation.

The prospect of leaving a deceased relative behind in a distant place like East Awin made people anxious. They talked about how to bury bodies in order to recover them easily. Some spoke of exhuming bones for reburial in a patriot's cemetery. In the event of *merdeka*, people would exhume the graves of 'important people' at East Awin, re-interning them in their place of origin. Leonardo cited a book about a Vietnam war memorial in the United States (US) that gave a complete history of those buried: name, rank, date and cause of death. He proposed that the bones of West Papuan patriots killed on the border should be recovered: 'Bones or ashes, it is important that their families see the remains with their own eyes.' For those graves not exhumed, relatives would install durable signs like a cement surface or tin roof, or prominent trees like coconut, *ketapang* and breadfruit. These things would identify the grave to descendants. The rationale was that: 'Parents must not disappear or be finished, their graves must be known by their grandchildren.' Some claimed that as the site of burial was not their land, graves were vulnerable to tampering and bones could be

removed. Some feared the forest would become overgrown, concealing the cemetery completely. When Yakub's adult son drowned tragically in the Fly River, he buried him at Kiunga, which he considered to be more proximate to his *dusun* in Irian Jaya than East Awin. Yakub planned that in the event of his repatriation he could readily attend his son's grave in Kiunga.

Burial of West Papuan children born in PNG caused particular sadness because it was considered that they had never seen their actual place of origin. The death of an adult person was mourned because they would not see their beloved homeland again. At the funeral of Lina—whose life is recounted in Chapter 11—mourners sang songs lamenting her premature departure. In a lamentation song, the elderly Mamberamo singer regretted that she and Lina would not retrace the journey home together: 'Together we came to this place / O you have left us before we could return home / You have abandoned us in this foreign place which is not ours.'

The precariousness of exile where one may live and die alone is epitomised in the story of the death of Leonardo's uncle in an Amsterdam apartment. By the time his uncle's body was discovered, it had decomposed, and the odour of the putrefied body had permeated the apartment. People recounting this story expressed horror that someone could die in an urban setting and remain undiscovered for a long period of time. Leonardo's uncle was neither washed, dressed, watched over nor lamented. The imperative of burial in the homeland was recalled in stories told of elderly West Papuans living in exile in the Netherlands. One man wrote a letter to Indonesia's President Habibie about his desire to return to West Papua to die. The letter recalled the two places of West Papuan and Holland metaphorically, in terms of objects deemed native to each: '[When] I die, [better to be] buried beneath a coconut palm than an apple tree.' The meaning of the place of burial illuminates the notion of home. Lovell has written that for people exhumed and reburied after a period of 'mortuary exile', as well as people returning from exile in order to die and be buried in their home village, home is conceived as a place of return, 'an original settlement where peace can finally be found and experienced, even after death'.⁶

At East Awin also, people were compelled to bring their deceased kin out of mortuary exile. On return to the homeland or the original settlement, the experience of peace would be affected by the memory of deceased kin left behind in the place of exile. In spite of the generation of East Awin as a social space—even a homeplace from where parting occurred—most people aspired to return to their geographical place of origin. As long as the deceased could be repatriated, people believed that true peace could only be had in the homeland—for the living and the dead.

ENDNOTES

¹ Appadurai

² Appadurai, pp. 178–99.

³ cf. Pim Schoorl, *Kebudayaan dan Perubahan Suku Muyu dalam Arus Modernisasi Irian Jaya*, Grasindo, Jakarta, 1997, p. 25.

⁴ Casey, 'How to get from space', pp. 24–5.

⁵ Kirsch, 'The Yonggom of New Guinea', pp. 125–6.

⁶ N. Lovell, 'Introduction: belonging in need of emplacement?', in N. Lovell (ed.), *Locality and belonging*, Routledge, London, 1998, p. 3.