

## Chapter 8

### Becoming translokal

After only three years at East Awin, Conrad left in 1995 to make a reconnaissance journey to Irian Jaya to assess the feasibility of permanent return. In his absence, Conrad's *dusun* and that of his neighbours had been levelled to the ground and developed as a transmigration settlement. Local landholders—Conrad's neighbours—had been integrated into the settlement as *translokal*. They had been issued with a 2-hectare land parcel, a prefabricated timber dwelling, and food rations for the first season. Conrad's return to East Awin in 1999 coincided with my research, and over many sessions he recounted the fate of returnees and how they had become local transmigrants known as *translokal*.

By making Conrad's account the material of this chapter I have no pretensions about it being unreservedly subjective, specifically in relation to Kanum relocation and the delineation of Kanum territory. The value of Conrad's account is not as an object for metadiscursive analysis, that is, bringing other research and reports to bear on his version in order to validate it, or mark its deviation from official accounts. Rather, the value is that it stands plainly as a cautionary tale to prospective returnees. Plainly, the action of repatriation risks becoming *translokal*. By foregrounding radical change at the local level, Conrad warns against utopic thinking. Some refugees, despite knowing that the 1997 drought was island-wide, recalled their own *dusun* as fecund and predictable in opposition to drought-ravaged East Awin. Conrad's account reveals how *dusun* have been transformed in people's absence, into partitioned rice paddies populated by Indonesian farmers and retired military personnel.

Conrad's narrative also shifts our focus from the minutiae of settlement at East Awin, to the two journeys on either side: arriving and leaving. It reveals how colonial partitioning of territory, and the intricate histories of groups whose land is contiguous across an international boundary, gets caught up in people's experiences as refugees. Conrad and his Kanum neighbours were classified as refugees and relocated to East Awin because they crossed the international border as citizens of Indonesia. The fact that they claimed land rights in the place where they crossed, and shared language and kin relations with the people there, was finally taken into account on their return in 1995. Muyu refugees were faced with similar dilemmas when they crossed the border as Indonesian citizens and camped on the land of people with whom they shared the Yonggom language and kin relations.

Conrad's account begins with the circumstances of his relocation to East Awin from a border camp. In 1992, following a raid by the Indonesian military on the border town of Sota, 100 families fled on foot for 15 kilometres to a location east of the border near Wereave, a village lying between the towns of Sota to the north west and Weam to the south. After complaints against the Sota group by local landholders, the PNG government and UNHCR arranged for the relocation of the group to East Awin.

To understand the meaning of Kanum crossing boundaries, Conrad classified them based on the locality of their customary land or *dusun*. He differentiated several Kanum clans whose territory lay close to Sota in Irian Jaya. According to Conrad, some Kanum claimed their *dusun* to be around Sota, extending in an easterly direction as far as the Torassi River in PNG. Some claimed their *dusun* to lie to the north, and to the south of Sota. Others claimed their *dusun* lay east of the Torassi River which is inside PNG. From Conrad's point of view, the centre of Kanum-ness, or the point of focus for Kanum, lies around the area that became the township of Sota. Kanum inhabit an area divided by an international boundary. Those who reside to the west are categorised as citizens of Indonesia, and those to the east are citizens of PNG. Kanum in PNG speak a little Indonesian, and Kanum in Irian Jaya speak a little Motu, a PNG lingua franca.

Kanum distinctions became complicated in the 1930s. At that time, Dutch Protestant missionaries established a school and church on Kanum land at a place on the western side of the Torassi River which was named Waia. It was previously a coconut garden, and according to Conrad lay inside Kanum *dusun*. The institutions of church and school drew other Kanum away from their respective *dusun* to the place of Waia. Three years later, the international border was demarcated, and the Australian government claimed that the Dutch school and church were incorrectly located on the eastern side of the border. The Dutch missionaries then relocated their school and church 10 kilometres to the west inside the Netherlands New Guinea boundary, to a place that became known as Sota.

Some Kanum whose *dusun* lay to the west of the Torassi River, followed the mission and relocated to Sota, which was in effect the western most part of their *dusun*. I will call these people Sota Kanum. The *dusun* of Sota Kanum stretched from Sota in the west to the Torassi River in the east. For those Kanum whose *dusun* lay to the east of the Torassi, relocation to Sota would have been too far from their *dusun*. With the school and church at Waia gone, they relocated to the village of Wereave near Waia. These people I will call Wereave Kanum. Those Sota Kanum who vacated the eastern part of their *dusun* when they relocated to Sota, gave rights of use to this *dusun* to other Kanum (i.e., Wereave Kanum). These rights to land given to Wereave Kanum were merely 'rights of use', as it was considered that they sustained full rights to their own *dusun*

further to the east. Conrad defines rights of use (as opposed to rights of ownership) as provisional: 'those with rights of use must surrender this right if it is reclaimed by the *dusun* owner. Rights of use cannot be practised forever. There will come a time when these rights are withdrawn by the the *dusun* owner.'

In 1992 after the Indonesian military raid, residents of Sota who were both Indonesian citizens and Kanum sought refuge across the international border in PNG. They were eventually housed in UNHCR tents, and they gathered food from the surrounding *dusun* as though they had rights to that land. They formed a makeshift settlement on an area of land that lay between the international border and the western bank of the Torassi River in PNG. According to Conrad, this was the land that Sota Kanum had vacated in the 1930s, and for which rights of use had been subsequently granted to Wereave Kanum. With this history in mind, some Sota Kanum reasserted their right of ownership. Wereave Kanum protested that the land in question lay inside PNG and that Sota Kanum were Indonesian citizens. Wereave Kanum argued that Sota Kanum were border crossers, and Sota Kanum argued that they were the original inhabitants. The Wereave Kanum who had been settled since the 1930s on *dusun* around Wereave became increasingly anxious. Finally they made a formal complaint to the government, claiming Sota Kanum to be Indonesian citizens who had resettled themselves in PNG on land that was not their own. Conrad, himself a Sota Kanum, defended the claim that Sota Kanum *dusun* extended across the international border as far as the Torassi River in PNG. In the process of the PNG Government and UNHCR handling the dispute, all the people of Sota camped near Wereave were classified as refugees, and were relocated to East Awin. Conrad said: 'According to customary law, we [Sota Kanum] had full rights to resettle at Wereave and resume our *dusun* activities of hunting, harvesting sago and gardening. But according to the PNG government, we were foreigners—refugees.'

Wereave Kanum used their national citizenship to trump ethnicity. Conrad viewed it as expedient: 'Kanum people don't consider there is an international boundary between the (border) towns of Sota and Weam. Whereas others [Indonesian tourists] once they go past the border marker which is decorated with state symbols including Pancasila, they consider themselves in a foreign country outside of their own country.' Conrad said that before the international boundary was marked by a post, the area was *polos* meaning 'blank'. 'Blank' in this context means contiguous, continuous, undifferentiated. Aside from the border post, a monument known as Sabang Merauke was installed at the entry point to Sota township in 1987. The monument's title invokes the trope of the Indonesian archipelago: from Sabang (in the west i.e., Sumatra) to Merauke (in the east i.e., Irian Jaya). The garuda eagle, official seal of the Indonesian state, perches above it. The monument symbolically delineates the boundaries of the archipelago. For those living on its margins, like West Papuans, the trope draws

their identity westward and back towards the centre, away from the margins and 'Melanesia' to the east.

The movement of Kanum is regulated to some extent by the border, and they must carry identification. Those from the west cross to the east for hunting and gardening because land in the west has become barren, and game is still abundant in the east. People from the east crossing to the west must carry the yellow pass issued by the PNG government, and people from the west crossing to the east must carry the red pass of the Indonesian government. These passes permit the holder to live for six months in the other place, and allow freedom of movement within the Kanum region. As Conrad said:

Before 1992 we had to approach the Neighborhood Association and request permission to obtain a border pass with the reason for example, 'I want to fetch fish from the Torassi river and visit my relatives there.' An official letter would be issued stating that 'this person has been given permission'. This letter then had to be taken to the Village Secretary to make a travel pass that would then be signed and stamped by the Village Head. But since the change, since Suharto fell, the border pass system has changed. Now I must take my residence identification card with a passport photo to the Immigration Office. A stamped red border pass will be issued. We just arrive and request: 'I want to go there [Weam]' and can request a pass for up to six months.

Some Kanum land on both sides of the border has been classified by the respective states as conservation areas. To the west, Sota is part of the Wasur National Park of Indonesia, and to the east, Weam is a part of the Tonda Wildlife Management Area of PNG. Wasur regulations prohibit Kanum people from hunting native species such as cassowary, pig and kangaroo—only deer may be hunted. But Kanum are allowed rights to firewood collection using traditional tools such as axes, and hunting rights with bows and arrows. On the Indonesian side, Kanum have been registered and photographed. Identification as Kanum permits access to their customary land for the purposes of hunting game.

Conrad remembered Sota as a well-serviced place. Most houses were connected to mains water and electricity. Streets were lit, houses were lit, and even outhouses or toilets had lights. Roofs were made of tin, and people had fences with front gates. In comparison, Wereave across the border was a rural village: houses had thatch roofs, and had neither running water nor electricity. East Awin resembled Wereave, except that they had to build their own houses and thatch their own roofs. At East Awin, the Sota group named their camp 'Weski' after the villages they had reached at the end of their flight path. 'Weski' referenced the PNG villages of Weam and Suki. During the initial five months, Weski refugees received tinned fish and rice rations. But people complained that they had not been issued with roofing material like other refugees who had

been issued with a 'one off' supply of reinforced plastic. Weski refugees were forced to make thatch from the porous leaves of forest coconut palm.

According to Conrad, before being airlifted to East Awin, Sota people received a letter from the Indonesian government. The letter warned that their *dusun* would be developed as a transmigration settlement if they did not return. Later, at East Awin they received a second letter from the government inviting them to return to help develop the new transmigration settlement. Ninety-four families decided to return to Irian Jaya in 1993. Some had not even moved out of the temporary UNHCR shelters in which they had been housed since their arrival 12 months earlier. Conrad explained that the Sota group from Weski camp chose repatriation for several reasons: they felt intimidated and disillusioned by the political dynamic at East Awin where factions recruited each other's supporters; they were reluctant to build new houses when they had left far more comfortable ones behind; and with suspension of rations they felt they would be unable to subsist from a small garden alone. Additionally, they perceived East Awin to belong to antagonistic landholders who had not been adequately compensated. According to Conrad, repatriation was not a difficult decision to make, for at the time of departure the deprivations of East Awin seemed to outweigh the risks of return. He used an aphorism to explain the decision as black and white: 'those returning home live, those remaining die'.

Under the auspices of the UNHCR, 94 families were repatriated to Irian Jaya. They were not relocated to Sota however. Instead, the Indonesian government housed them in an empty section of an existing transmigration site on the outskirts of the southern city of Merauke. According to Conrad, they lived in Merauke for 12 months and were 're-educated' in the principles of the Indonesian state philosophy of Pancasila. Pancasila comprises principles regarded as the ideological foundation of the Indonesian nation-state including belief in God, the sovereignty of the people and national unity. An investigation was undertaken into the incident of their flight into PNG, and some refugees were interrogated. From Merauke they were eventually relocated back to 'Sota' but the township as they remembered it no longer existed. Their ancestral land had been purged: cleared and levelled. Three coconut plantations had been cleared as well as bamboo stands, and mango, orange and rose fruit trees. *Dusun* houses indicating ownership and occupation had been demolished. According to Conrad, after fleeing Sota in 1992, the *dusun* surrounding it was annexed by the government. The absent landholders were considered to be political fugitives—law breakers—by virtue of their action of flight across the international border. The village head was then forced to sign over the land without agreement from the actual landholders who had been relocated to East Awin. According to Conrad, seizing Kanum land in their absence was expedient and it followed a logic of retaliation.

A church was all that remained of the former town of Sota, known as 'Old Sota'. Conrad mapped the town, using coloured pencils to delineate the sections of the transmigration settlement. The main street or Sota Road partitions two areas of the transmigration settlement known as Sota I. These two areas contain over 300 families. Each area consists of two parallel rows, four in total. The parallel rows are divided again into sections, and each row consists of six sections. Sota I resembles a suburban subdivision of land, only each section contains several segregated plots and houses. The population is also purposefully configured. Sota Kanum returnees from East Awin live in the northern section, alongside other West Papuans who are not local and retired military personnel known as *transpensiun*. The latter receive a government pension, a standard prefabricated house, and rations, in return for surveillance activity. Transmigrants from Java are accommodated in the southern section of Sota I. All settlers are issued with prefabricated housing made of softwood timber. Flooring is dirt, and those settlers who prefer a concrete floor must pay for it themselves. For Kanum, living on a dirt floor signifies their displacement. They prefer to build their houses off the ground on stilts, because they believe that breeze should flow through a house and that ground-level houses are negatively affected by steam that rises from the earth.

At Old Sota, some coconut palms, banana palms and orange trees remained. Sago stands were also preserved intact because they were on lower ground in a valley. Although Kanum are resident in Sota I as *translokal*, they pick fruit, cultivate the land of Old Sota for gardening and gather pandanus leaves from nearby swamps to make mats and bags. They also use their passes to access their *dusun* to the east of the border around the Torassi River.

Appadurai's theorising of neighbourhood illuminates transmigration settlements as a social formation.<sup>1</sup> It is the subversive potential of neighbourhoods that causes the state to police them like they do borders. Indonesian transmigration settlements are spatially and socially partitioned, and surveillance is embedded. This formation or configuration effectively 'localises' transmigrants and *translokal*. Here 'localise' refers to being corralled, surveyed and managed. Conceivably, West Papuan *translokal* and Indonesian transmigrants continue to seek to produce and reproduce their own neighbourhoods and localities within the transmigration settlement. Their efforts might be undermined by the activities of military personnel who seek to deter the production of locality among residents. Yet the administration is not totalising and may even unintentionally create an environment that supports locality, for example, by permitting Kanum *translokal* to undertake hunting and cultivation activities in their own *dusun* outside the transmigration settlement.

Devastation of ancestral *dusun* at Sota meant the eviction of landholders' ancestral spirit beings that connect Kanum as descendants to their ancestors. Conrad

believed that emplaced ancestral spirits would have fled in terror once the felling and clearing began. These spirits known as *dema*<sup>2</sup> to Kanum speakers, are deceased ancestors who may take the form of a particular animal and dwell in natural landscape features. Evicted from their dwelling places, *dema* seek out places similar to those destroyed: a banyan tree or another very large old tree, a sago or bamboo stand, or a large rock formation. A landholder may cultivate a flower garden, or plant a betelnut tree, kava (*wati*) plant or sago tree to entice the wandering *dema* to settle. If a *dema* has not settled in another dwelling place, it will wander and become a risk to local people, especially small children. Settled *dema* offer protection and prosperity to living descendants, who must offer alms such as betelnut or cooked food in return. A *dema* may detach itself from a descendant if they neglect to offer alms, in which case a descendant's wellbeing can be negatively affected.

The disappearance of *dema* makes its descendants vulnerable: 'If its place is damaged, disturbed, it will flee to a new place. The original place will become barren, and the inhabitants of that place will no longer be looked after.' During the process of clearing Sota, a bulldozer operator felling a tree was crushed to death when the tree fell on him. Conrad interpreted the incident in terms of *dema* retaliation: the felled tree had been the dwelling place of a *dema*. If the Indonesian government had compensated the Kanum landholders, the latter could have reassured the *dema* and no recourse would have been required. Conrad would excuse neither Javanese transmigrants nor the Indonesian authorities for ignoring the rights of landholders and their ancestral spirits. For throughout the archipelago and including Java, people believe in their own ancestral spirits in their own place and offer alms routinely.

An evicted *dema* surprised in daylight may assume a human form such as a small child. It had happened that:

A *dema* which inhabited a place which was built into a soccer field became crowded out and fled into the forest because its place was destroyed. An Indonesian soldier saw it sitting beneath a tree in the forest crying and shot the *dema* thinking it was OPM. The *dema* fled deeper into the forest but returned that night to slash the soldier with a machete. It was only the intervention of an old person from Sota who spoke with the *dema* that saved the soldier's life (Conrad).

In Conrad's story, the identity of the ancestral spirit or *dema*, and the OPM freedom fighter, is merged. The Indonesian soldier mistakes the *dema*, whose identity is bound to territory, for an OPM fighter, whose struggle is against the alienation of Papuan land. Both *dema* and OPM fighter weep over the occupation of their place, and their marginalisation. The Indonesian soldier, completely oblivious to the vulnerability of the weeping figure, is trained to shoot on sight. The soldier seeks to eliminate the person that he suspects as OPM. But ancestral

spirits are not mortal, and their defence of their descendants and 'possession' of their ancestral land cannot be extinguished. They have an enduring metaphysical connection with a geographical territory. When the wrath of the displaced ancestral spirit is pitted against the Indonesian soldier in an action of retaliation, it is the mortal descendant of the ancestral spirit, an old person from Sota, who intervenes to save the life of the soldier. As descendant, the old person is part of the same metaphorical field as the *dema*. His compassionate intervention to save the soldier's life invokes the humanity of OPM fighters usually represented as less than human.

The projection that Indonesian soldiers view all Sota people as OPM sympathisers acted as a deterrent to some Weski returnees. Many chose not to return to Irian Jaya. Instead, they made use of their rights to Kanum *dusun* lying between the international border and the Torassi River in PNG. Relocation to Wereave was not straightforward however. After their return from East Awin to Wereave in 1995, negotiations with PNG government officials resulted in Wereave being partitioned in two. 'New Wereave' was relocated 4 kilometres to the east of the original village of Wereave, which was subsequently designated 'Old Wereave'. Those Wereave Kanum who had been resident since the 1930s were relocated to New Wereave, and lost rights to the hunting ground and sago and cocount stands around Old Wereave. Sota Kanum returnees settled at Old Wereave on the Torassi River, and registered as citizens of PNG. Wereave Kanum call them 'refugees', identifying them as stateless people living outside their actual *dusun*.

Forced migration can simultaneously render refugees vulnerable to violence, and in the process of resettlement refugees may have no real choice but to engage in actions that violate the land of others. Conrad's elaboration about loss of *dusun* and displaced *dema* offer insight into the way Kanum and others experienced living as refugees at East Awin. In conversation with Conrad and Muyu interlocutors, I recorded use of the Indonesian term '*keramat*' meaning 'sacred and possessing supernatural qualities', to refer to sites like churches and ancestral land. I also recorded use of the Indonesian infinitive '*rusak*', meaning 'to damage' or 'to spoil', when referring to destruction wreaked on a site considered to be sacred. Many refugees projected that the Awin landholders of the UNHCR settlement site viewed the refugee population to be spoiling their ancestral land. Of the refugee population, it was Kanum and Muyu—who sustained deep attachment to their own *dusun*—who tended to project themselves as spoiling the sacred character of Awin land.

It is not coincidental that Kanum and Muyu are practising Catholics, and also sustain concurrent beliefs in a metaphysical realm, ascribing agency to other non-human inhabitants of the landscape. The approach of the Montfort Catholic Church of the Diocese of Daru-Kiunga which includes East Awin, is syncretic. By this I mean that concurrent beliefs in custom and the gospel are accepted.

For example, former East Awin resident priest Jacques Gros explained Christianity to me as a 'meta-cosmic' belief system that does not abolish 'cosmic' systems which are ancestral, but merely covers them, or lands on them like a hover plane. Kanum and Muyu projections about spoiling Awin sacred land are entirely congruous with a conception of ancestral land as enspirited. From a Muyu worldview, every place is a *dusun* possessed by the spirits of deceased landowners buried there. Making a garden on someone else's land without the permission of the landowner, and the spirits of his ancestors, is to deny the *keramat* character of these places. These ancestral spirits protect the interests of their descendants in that place, and non-descendant dwellers may be considered foreigners unless acknowledgment or compensation is arranged. It was the fact that Conrad and the others were not descendant from ancestral spirits capable of acting malevolently to people identified as foreigners, that was the source of their vulnerability at East Awin.

Among Muyu and Kanum refugees particularly, the sentiment of being an agent of 'desecration' at East Awin has not been conducive to a process of settling. It is one factor among several (including the absence of the staple food sago, famine during the 1997 drought, general food insecurity and antagonistic landholders) that has tended to inhibit settling. The dual sense of 'being desecrating' and being displaced sustains their yearning to return to their own *dusun* where they might resume relations with their own ancestral spirits and restore their autonomy as landowners over a familiar and secure place. At East Awin it was Kanum and Muyu who expressed feelings of weakness and loss. Whereas urban northerners tended to express their hardship at East Awin in terms of material deprivation, and more abstract concepts like discrimination and lack of rights.

The real prospect of becoming *translokal* acts as a deterrent to repatriation, particularly among Muyu whose region now supports vast transmigration settlements constructed since 1984. Even a formally negotiated repatriation program cannot protect returnees from being reintegrated as *translokal*. In the mid-1990s, Yakub joined an observation party comprising three other refugees from East Awin, a Red Cross representative from Jakarta and the East Awin camp administrator. The group was escorted to Merauke to observe the conditions of returnees, and to meet with local government officials, and military officials. Yakub recalled:

We asked [them]: 'Is it true or not that people who return are tortured with electric current?' The government official answered: 'Yes, there is no problem to both questions.' Then we travelled under escort to transmigration sites and spoke with refugees who had been resettled. They could not speak freely but we gathered their long-term safety was not certain. [I ask:] 'Are they being treated well to entice other refugees to return? Is it a trap? Will we all be punished later, after our return?'

According to Yakub, one of the motivations of the Indonesian government in hosting the visit was to showcase regional development. This is not surprising as the Indonesian government claimed that it was uneven development that had enticed Muyu people to cross into PNG as economic refugees. The visiting party was shown a straight road surfaced with asphalt that connected Merauke to other parts of the region. Yakub was not unimpressed by such an engineering feat: 'you can see approaching vehicles as a speck in the distance'. But Yakub remained unconvinced that the life of a *translokal* was a sustainable one. Being *translokal* would realise their worst fears at the time of fleeing in 1984: that their ancestral land would be appropriated, and they would become objects of the state.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Appadurai, pp. 182–8.

<sup>2</sup> J. Van Baal, *Dema, description and analysis of Marind Anim culture (South New Guinea)*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1966.