

Peregrinação de Enmanuel Jhesus The Pilgrimage of Enmanuel Jhesus

Pedro Rosa Mendes



Pedro Loureiro



Peregrinação de Enmanuel Jhesus
[THE PILGRIMAGE OF ENMANUEL JHESUS]
Lisbon: Dom Quixote, 2010;
pp. 352
ISBN 978-972-20-4067-9

Pedro Rosa Mendes

(Cernache do Bonjardim, 1968)

He began his journalistic career in Coimbra in 1988 and joined the founders of *Público* the following year, going on to become the newspaper's Luanda correspondent. As a reporter he covered conflicts in Angola, Rwanda, Zaire/DRC, Western Sahara, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Ivory Coast, Afghanistan and the former Yugoslavia, winning Portugal's Bordalo Prize for Print Journalism in 2000. Between 2007 and 2009 he was posted in East Timor as Dili correspondent for the Agência Lusa de Notícias (the official news agency of Portugal), before becoming the agency's man in Paris, where he currently lives.

He has had several works of fiction published, *Baía dos Tigres* (*Bay of Tigers: A Journey Through War-torn Angola*) in 1999, which won the PEN Club Fiction prize, *Atlântico* (*Atlantic*) in 2003, and *Lenin Oil* (*Lenin Oil*) in 2006, the latter in collaboration with illustrator Alain Corbel. He has also written several books of reportage, including *Ilhas de Fogo* (*Islands of Fire*) in 2001 and *Madre Cacau - Timor* (*Mother Cacau - Timor*) in 2004, and *Schwarz Licht, Passagen durch Westafrika* (*Black Light - Journey through Western Africa*), with photographs by Wolf Böwig, which was published by Brandes & Apsel Verlag in Frankfurt in 2006.

"Pedro Rosa Mendes is back with a novel about Timor that is at once tragic, disenchanted, scholarly and fascinating."

João Miguel Tavares – *Time Out*

"It is one of those books that will doubtless end up etched on your brain."

João Céu e Silva – *Diário de Notícias*

"One could try to find words and phrases to describe the magic prose that surges so unexpectedly from these three hundred pages, but it would be a waste of time: *The pilgrimage of Enmanuel Jhesus* simply has to be read."

João Céu e Silva – *Diário de Notícias*

"It would be no exaggeration to call *The pilgrimage of Enmanuel Jhesus* one of the most beautiful and courageous books published in Portugal this year. (...) it's a demanding, dense and poetic novel, which fascinates and terrifies. And always avoids the obvious."

Helena Ferro de Gouveia – *Visão*



FOR FOREIGN RIGHTS PLEASE CONTACT
The Mertin Agency
Nicole Witt - n.witt@mertin-litag.de
www.mertin-litag.de

THE PILGRIMAGE OF ENMANUEL JHESUS

NOVEL

© Translated from the Portuguese by Ken Krabbenhoft

*For at a certain point of decay, filth and
purity became one, both reduced to their
chemical elements, all the peculiarities of
their origins stripped away*

In Aleksander Tišma, *Kapo*
translated from Serbo-Croatian by Richard Williams
(Harcourt Brace Company 1993)

1. Matarufa

At nine o'clock on the morning of Saturday, September 4, 1999, at the Ma'hkota Hotel in Dili, Ian Martin, head of the international mission, announced the outcome of the referendum in East Timor: 21.5 percent had voted in favor of autonomy, and 78.5 percent had voted against it.

The announcement was made simultaneously at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. There was no doubt about the result, as "the Commission was able to determine that the vote was free of irregularities with respect of procedure and in conformity with the New York Agreement. It was consequently an accurate reflection of the will of the people of East Timor, without distortions or restraints of any kind".

In the midst of indescribable rejoicing I noticed a man waving to me from the entrance to the Ma'hkota lobby. He was gesturing for me to go over to him. He greeted me politely. He was excessively formal for the circumstances, making no reference to the news that was at that moment traveling around the globe. He merely said

"I have a task for you",

and placed a cardboard box in my hands,

addressed to the "Office of the President of the Republic of Timor-Dilly".

"Maybe you'd like to open it,"

Glancing over his shoulder, he lifted the lid of the box by both ends.

From the box came a stench of festering wounds. I can still smell it. It stuck to me, to us. It shouldn't have been, but it was the smell of a newborn nation, Lorosa'e, the smell of Ian Martin, close by, assuring us and the world,

"There's no doubt whatsoever that the overwhelming majority of the people of this troubled country wants to secede from the Republic of Indonesia".

The man with the box remarked, dispassionately,

"It wasn't us".

He lit a *kretek*.

"It was your side, your territory. We accept tradition, just as we accept the outcome – yet another *loroçá* of the *aswain Timor oan*. But it is a pity that they've done this to him just now".

The man was wearing a traditional Javanese shirt of pure silk, extravagantly elegant: a design of small sailboats against a mauve and cream background. I noticed that the sails had Templar crosses on them. Nuno

Álvares Pereira had the same ones on his mantle in my books in Soibada. They looked a lot like the sixteenth-century caravels that arrived in the Indian Ocean with Portuguese on board. On the man's right shoulder the Lusitanian armada sailed in formation over a sea of bright silk. A strange effect for a strange occasion. I thought: the silent, cynical subtlety of the Javanese.

A maggot emerged from the box. The captain of the silk armada seemed to be nauseated by my nausea. He took a greedier drag on the *kreték* and threw the cigarette on the ground without extinguishing it. As he gazed at the little ember fading into ash at our feet he repeated,

“Just now, when he'd come back to life for a reason”,

with which he bowed and walked out of the Ma'hkota with his silk galleons, leaving me with my independence in my hands, the way it had been delivered to us by Indonesia. A cigarette butt smelling of carnations and death.

In the box was a man's head.

2. Dalboekerkerk

From the highest peaks of Mount Matebian, the coupled Man and Woman, on a clear day one sees hundreds or thousands of steep, austere rocks. They are human in shape, sculpted by the elements, lacking any clear purpose. A horde, an exodus, a procession, a necropolis? The rocks, of imposing size in comparison to a man, elude the comprehension of anyone standing next to them, disguised by their hugeness. Only from a distance do they take on the true appearance of a symbolic group, when seen from the high places where there is little rain because, in fact, rain is in permanent residence there.

Formations like this seem to allude to the processes that are brought about or disrupted by cataclysm. They go in dissimilar directions or no direction at all, frozen in disquiet. They are lines and heaps delimiting meadows and escarpments, razor-straight or

wandering. Their silhouette grows more dramatic when consecrated by dawn and twilight and in the greenish inebriation of fog. These rocks, each resting on the shoulders of another, here seem to want to climb laboriously higher, but from the side look like they are about to descend en masse. To the careful observer this activity does not follow the shape of the land over which nature has scattered these rocks, rather it conforms to the uniform arrangement of its highest part. For erosion, at the slow pace of the mineral world, has twisted each megalith's bulk into a sullen, weary, or submissive shape, an expression of the discouragement that forces the neck down and to the side the way trees bend in obedience to the wind.

From other angles and viewpoints the stone's bony structure creates the illusion of vertebra and dorsal scales. Such is the indiscretion of paleogeology that a colossal pliocene beast could be lurking right there, at the terminus of the arc formed by the Lesser Sonda Islands like a porch leaning over the oceanic world. These formations could well be a remnant of Matebian's primordial nature, a creature slumbering in its own fossil remains, invisible because it is the same size as the island. Matebian, a door ajar at the entrance to the chambers of Maromak, the Enlightened One, is the highpoint of the heavens, though it was once the bottom of the sea, when land masses and animals, sheltered in the watery uterus of the Earth, were yet to be born. The presence of seashells at altitudes over 2000 meters! and the coral makeup of the peaks bear witness to this. Who knows? Maybe this great mountain supports the Timor range at sea level – it's the only island in the group that is not of volcanic origin. Eternities boom on Matebian, revealed as they challenge each other on the highest cliffs by winds that never sink to sea level and by the occasional rumbling of earthquakes in the sunken heart of Earth.

Matebian means “Mountain of Souls” in the language of the Macassai, the people of the same name who inhabit the strip of land that stretches between the island's two seas,

Man and Woman. To the east, the bumps of the Lost World (dominated by the crags and gulches of Viqueque); to the west, the plateau of Lospalos. Matebian is a transitional zone between the people who speak Macassai and the peoples who speak Naueti and Macalere, located in the amphitheaters that the massif extends as far as the Man-Sea, called the Timor Sea. These and other Timorese peoples, as I gathered from various stories that I heard in the area, adopted Matebian and venerate it for being the origin of the shared worship of their most distant forbears. Matebian also means “souls of the ancestors”. Even more than this, however, Matebian designates the shared living place from which issue and to which return the lifelines that bring the Timorese together into families, the families into clans, and the clans into nations.

These narrative lines, wrapped in legends and taboos, have as many rings as the decapitated head of a centuries-old tree. They begin with a grandfather of the great-grandmothers; they protect the *lia-nain*, the “lords of the word” whose prodigious memory is their ritual profession, so vast that the living memory of the group resides in it. Put in yet another way, the ancestors are their own special place. This is why this mountain is the noblest one in Timor, even though it is not the highest. Matebian, mountain of the beginning and the end, corresponds to the moment and the location where the word, in memory, recreates the genesis of the world of Timor.

I got along well with the man-like stones of Matebian. I learned to value their constancy, if not their loyalty. They received me with unwavering attention, sometimes weeping rain, other times exploding in the heat. In the more humid years, festooned with moss and vines, they had a festive look. Other years, when the summer was more oppressive, they had measles spots of yellow lichen. For three decades, no matter what time of day I went looking for them, they were always in the same spot. It wouldn't be hard to believe that they've been waiting for me for centuries and will continue to wait after I've

come their way for the last time. They, not I, know when this last time will be.

I know some of the stones by name, because I named them. Giving a stone a name is safer than naming a child, and it is more honorable than naming a flower or an animal. When I was a child I dreamt of giving my name to a new species of eucalyptus, orchid, or butterfly. But my life didn't follow that path. It took other, unrelated ones that converged on Timor.

I Christianized the stones. I know who they are by their personal names. I can easily remember people who disappeared from before my very eyes in the last 24 years in this land of Timor. It's because during this time I've been giving the names of the people who disappeared to the stones. This is my private archive. A civil register, if you will, with records of birth that match death certificates, and the other way around. In my register, in the silence of Matebian, there is a stone for every surprise attack, bombing, and massacre, for every time someone was tortured. It lists the names of allies and of foes, civilians and soldiers – professionals, militiamen, and guerrillas, Indonesian and Timorese.

There is or was an old man in Haekoni, in the foothills of Matebian, whom we allowed to wander around up there after 1978. Nicodemos once found me, as in earlier years, by a little lake above Rufaguaia. There's a small, fairly open field of megaliths there. There are two rocks that seem to be challenging each other from a distance of a few meters, bent over and pointed at each other like cowboys in a movie showdown. Not far from each other, in the final battle of November 1978, one of our soldiers and a soldier of the Falintil were stripped of camouflage: the thick fog that had hidden them from each other suddenly lifted. They were both unaware that the enemy was so close. Startled, the soldiers fired at the same time. Both shots hit their mark: the soldiers died at the same instant. On my Matebian the cowboy-stones at Rufaguaia bear the names of those two unfortunates. I've visited them several times to

reflect on our long-standing showdown. Nicodemus surprised me during one of those moments. He mustered the courage to ask if

“You Indonesians are going to occupy our ancestors, too, *Pak*?”

I had never read anything about this possibility in any manual of war, nor as any stratagem of *Integrasi*. I sat down next to the old man. Speaking softly into his ear, I answered:

“No, grandfather. Only those who happen to be our descendents”,

an idea that surely tormented the old gent for a few rainy seasons.

It is easier to name megaliths in Matebian than to explain the presence of this populace of stone on the Mountain of the Souls. It seems to be a group caught up in its own silence, walled in by its origin and their destiny. Many of the more unassuming and weather-beaten rocks are so human that, except for the difference in size, they remind one of the wooden *ai-toos* used to mark graves, *ete-uru ha’a* in the language of the Fatalucos of the East. These *ete-uru ha’a*, the height of a child, were set in the ground and held up by stones around the base. A few can still be found along mountain roads or in the forests of the East, stripped of bark, wearing a stunned expression and reduced to skin and bones by the monsoons. Like real human skin, which the vicissitudes of life toughen into the hide of old age, they have layers of cracks, rough spots, and wrinkles. The permanent inhabitants of Matebian are the same: women and men, warriors and shepherds, children and old people, slaves and kings – all of them weathered and beaten down until they have almost no name or presence. Eventually they dissolve in the fragile prayers of sand spun by those who descend from them. Unmoving, living-beings-of-stone protected by their horses, which graze alone inside the clouds, they await a someone or a somewhere, remembered and feared by the Timorese, because the only help they can count on comes from mythology.

If the myth tells the truth about this place, Matebian-Man and Matebian-Woman are

guarding, way up there, the totality of the descendents of the forefathers of Timor. Either that or – and this is dangerously greater – they are guarding the ancestors of all the island’s children. The legend is silent about the Enlightened One’s reasons for changing each of these beings into his private monument-mountain. Was it because they spent too much time looking back at the past? Or because they failed to agree on the future?

3. Matarufa

With the exception of rustic walks around the outskirts of Dili to collect Indian almonds or count the whales in the Ombai Strait – even when it isn’t October and they aren’t going to be any whales – excursions into the countryside are still more or less what they were fifty years ago, when Ruy Cinatti first traveled this way following the Japanese occupation, running around cataloguing champós and murungus whenever the governor let him.

One day he would arrive on a visit to Tibar, Liquiçá, and Maubara, in the lowland, another day climb up to Gleno and Ermera, an easy walk that foreigners always like, intrigued as they are by the silent vegetation of the plantations. Eight days’ journey in the opposite direction takes you to Dili, Baucau, Ossú, Venilale, Afaloicai, Baguia, Uatocarbau, Viqueque, Ossú, Lost World, Metinaro, Dili. In two more weeks you can trace a figure 8 through Ponta Leste, via Dili, Lautém, Lospalos, Muapitine, Tutuala, Lospalos, Loré, Baucau, Dili.

I wanted to know how long Alor had to complete his exploration, and Alor, astounded,

“Do you really think you know how much time you have?”

which made me feel I was free to put my cards on the table, so to speak, in front of the big map of *Tim-Tim* at police headquarters, because that’s where Alor had arranged to meet me. I gave him my opinion in a few words: if you want *Barat*, we’ll go west; if you

want *Timur* we'll head east; if you want to slog through mud and streams right now, in the rainy season, we'll head south. He listened, got the point, and, excited, came to a decision,

Timurtimurtimur!

I asked Alor to schedule another meeting, with other maps and better company. There wasn't anything good to be found at Dili Police HQ, not even a map: the one I first showed to Alor was a chart of military approaches to the island. It had information on bogs and currents and coral reefs and mangrove swamps and water depths along the coastline, along with a few coordinates for aircraft, like altitudes. It might be a good map for planning a sea landing but it was no use for getting around inland: the majority of the roads, which had in fact been built by the Indonesians, were lacking, and a number of places weren't even mentioned.

We met later in a restaurant in Bidau, run by someone we could trust. Alor spoke passionately about his architectural studies and how, when he finished university, he intended to specialize in the use of traditional construction techniques in the design of modern buildings. One of his mentors had suggested a research trip to *Tim-Tim*. So there we were, planning an expedition to the interior, in search of the Timorese house.

I sketched a preliminary work schedule for Alor's project: the Fataluco houses of the Lospalos plateau with a side trip through the Matebian massif, an area where the Fataluco and Macassai regions meet. Because it was so inaccessible, the area was of guaranteed interest for contact with materials and styles that were more authentic than in locales more affected by progress. Alor listened and at the end asked a single question,

"Is it true you spent a year in prison for being a guerrilla?"

What I said to him on that occasion was that my quite extensive knowledge of the interior of the country could be a benefit to his project and prevent him from falling into any number of traps, and he didn't press me any more. I continued: the first trap is that

the traditional Timorese house doesn't exist, *period*. There are different kinds of dwellings among the various Timorese peoples. I hinted that the first question Alor should put on the drawing board wasn't theoretical but political. Specifically, what "kind" of traditional house were they going to build for the leader? A slender *dagadá* house from the Lospalos plateau and the Matebian massif, a textbook example from *Tim-Tim* since the Portuguese colonial period: it could be, and in fact was, an obvious choice from the aesthetic point of view. It would nevertheless be controversial. The people of the western part of *Tim-Tim*, called 'calades' in the Portuguese colony, would resent the symbolism of a house inspired by the Fataluco, the Macassai, the 'firaco' Timorese, or *lorosa'e*. If on the other hand the model was a house from Maubisse, Bobonaro, Suai, or the enclave of Oécussi, the problem would be the same: all of these were of different types, for different peoples and in general from any western district, *loromonu*.

He wasn't even entering into the unavoidable debate about how, at the end of the millennium, a new 'traditional' house would incorporate the inevitable influence of European architecture in the areas of cost, comfort, and concept. In this chapter the architect must also decide which way to turn at the crossroads of Portuguese European and Dutch European influences, which in turn would bring relevant issues to the surface. The circle would be complete with the remote, underlying conventions that connect the *dagadá* house, for example, to types found in Sumatra, the Fiji Islands, and Indonesia: when they became apparent the Timorese people would hardly consider them 'traditional' in their country. Alor understood

"What you're doing a poor job of telling me is that *Tim-Tim* is an archipelago in dry dock, and that social envy begins with symbols"

"What I'm doing a poor job of telling you is that there's no point going to the trouble of building a traditional house that's going to burn up in a 'traditional' fire the day it's inaugurated".

4. Matarufa

“Crosses”

said Alor as we passed through Samalari on the road up from Laga, when his head banged again on the window to which he had entrusted his sleep. The metallic cabin retained its chill and its greasy smell. We were three men who had not had a bath, in Sixto’s case for weeks or months. Alor used his chest as a lap, wedging his head between his shoulders and his hands into his armpits. It was still night on the ridges, emptied of vegetation, animals, and pastures. On our left, against the lilac dawn,

Crosses and more crosses, one, two, three, four...

profiles of roofs and tombstones filed past, clearly outlined,

“You have more crosses than trees”,

Alor observed,

“One of these days you won’t have enough wood to mark the dead”,

to which our driver explained, without loosening his grip on the wheel,

“It’s the tragedy of our people, *Pak Alor*”,

but the young man wasn’t paying attention to old Sixto’s bad grammar,

“It seems Timor suffers a lot from *dissolation*”,

leaning into the window again he mouthed the number of kilometers to Baguia, his mouth agape; from it ran an appalling drool of spit, which I took for an omen,

“Twenty, thirty, fifty... a hundred... two hundred... three hundred... a thousand...”

5. Matarufa

There was a dog hanging on the Baguia church – dead. A noose held it by the paws, the free end tied to the bell’s axle. The killing had taken place shortly before our arrival in the town. A few minutes earlier and we would have been invited to take part in the honor, maybe even to deliver the first blow. On the square I saw men parading sledgehammers covered in the animal’s gore, very excited, their attention on the circle of women improvising ‘tebedais’, one of our graceful dances.

A stain of dark blood spread down the plaster wall from a splatter of brains and fur. This was the spot where the swinging arc of the dead dog struck the wall every time one of the kids on church roof struck the noose to make the corpse quiver, recovering the life that had been taken from it. The men below applauded their yelling and squealing as they called the poor animal in keeping with its anonymous fate,

“*Asu! Asu!* Wake up, *asu!*”

The dog did not wake up. From its inert body nothing but a drool of red saliva stretched from its snout to the ground, creating a small patch of shiny mud. Alor did not seem perturbed by any of these practices. He asked in a normal voice,

“What’s that?”

and Sixto, with professorial affectation, explained in just as normal a voice,

“It’s a belltower, sir”

“I know that... I mean why did they kill the dog?”

“They didn’t kill it. It’s the way they do things, sir”

“The way they do things?”

“It’s a tradition, sir”

“Timorese or Catholic?”

Sixto’s knowledge couldn’t answer this, so he repeated

“It’s the way they do things, sir”

gazing entranced at the dog.

“It’s a legitimate question”,

Father Rosário said. He had appeared next to us immersed in his peculiar appearance: a square, almost severe face, with two scars, dominated by the patch that covered his right eye, a long neck atop broad shoulders, long calloused hands, which is unusual for a priest. Thick silvery hair. Rosário spoke with a lisping Spanish accent acquired during his years of theological study in the Philippines, an accents that interested Alor. The priest embraced me. He held out his hand for Sixto to kiss. He gave Alor a blessing, raising his right hand to the level of his face. I noticed that Alor had spotted a clot of blood on the cuff of Rosário’s shirt.

“Are you from Timor, Father?”

“Almost, my son, almost. I’m from Flores. I was born in Sica and my roots are in Laran-tuca. But God wanted me to spread His word in other parts of the archipelago”

“In the footsteps of St Francis Xavier, then”.

“The path to illumination is not easy to follow, my son, and sainthood is not easy to imitate”

“What would St Francis Xavier say about *that*?”

“The dog? Another good question. Xavier wasn’t from Assisi”

the priest remarked maliciously,

“and maybe he didn’t think so much about the souls of animals as about saving the souls of men. We can always affirm that dogs are creatures of God, like the others – but His children, only us”

“That strikes me as quite... pagan”

“That it is, my son. Catholic pagan. But I can’t do theology on an empty stomach, may *Marômak* help us! That’s the holy name of God in the Tétum language. I’ve already asked them to make coffee in Xímenes’s house, which has the best porch in Baguia.

[...]