

The making of a nativity scene



I've always wanted to know more about the handmade nativity displays that are popping up on streets all around Timor-Leste at this time of the year.

As luck would have it, this week, we received this fascinating guest post from Marita Jacobsson about a group of untrained artists in Lospalos who are currently sculpting their figurines out of mud for their display.

We hope you enjoy it, it's a beauty!

Surprise Sculptures: formed from mud

Untrained Lospalos artists strive for National Presepio Prize

During late November 2014, I was staying in Lospalos, Timor-Leste, whilst working as a volunteer with the Australian NGO Many Hands International*. Along with director Kim Dunphy, we were involved with delivering a project promoting women's well-being with creative arts therapy and dance movement therapy approaches.

Over my week long day stay, as my colleagues and I wandered and drove past a cleared space next door to our hotel, we started to see an emerging structure form. Rocks were stacked up on a bamboo frame to form a cave like Presepio, or nativity scene. I have grown up with this Christmas ritual in regional Australia, usually done by a local church group and usually the same scene every year: giant cardboard cut outs of Mary and Joseph with the crib holding baby Jesus in a wooden shack. Yet here what I saw emerging filled me with surprise and curiosity. What were these mostly young men actually doing?



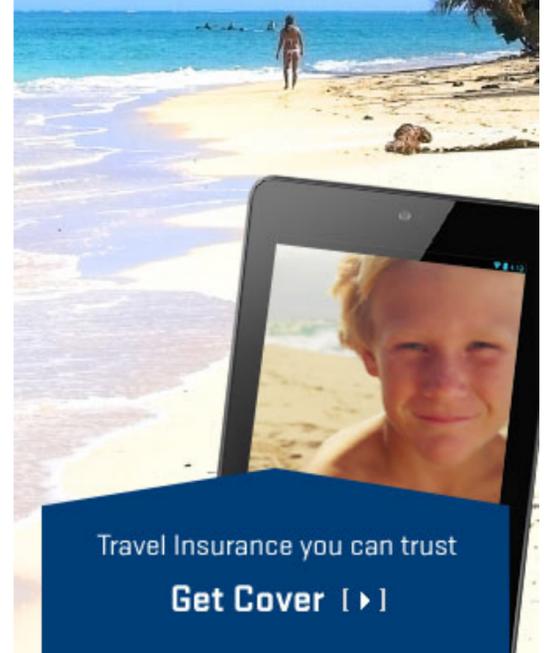
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Tree stumps cut on precise angles were perfectly lined up and dug into place creating a striking scene. This design, along with the sunglasses-wearing-young-men dwelling inside the Presepio each night listening to loud music on their huge speakers, had captivated me. A large throng of young men hung out on the street near their Presepio, looking cool and calling out hello each time we passed by. One night, as they roasted a pig on a fire on the side of the road for eating together, we approached the group to ask what they were up to. They invited us to get closer, encouraging us to walk up the muddy centre path to their Presepio in formation. We inspected their design, marvelling at the rocks stacked and arranged with no cement holding it all just right around the bamboo frame. Wow! These guys were highly skilled. They spoke to our little crowd of malae (foreigners) in Tetum and Indonesian, sharing photographs of the sculptures that they had been creating in another place nearby. They then offered to show us and escort us there. We agreed to go there straight away, fuelled by intrigue.

Venturing with them was like being on a pilgrimage into the unknown — down a gravel road, mobile phone screens and torches were shared to light our way and we were joined by more young men as we passed families in their houses. Dogs barked their warning but we continued on most curiously and trustingly. An excited anticipation hung in the air between us. Then before us appeared a small house with a bare room keeping the sculptures safe whilst the sculptors secretly worked on them. The room was lit by one fluorescent light that had been rewired out of the socket to allow for central overhead lighting, risky but innovative.



As I was about to step over the threshold I had a sense of the surreal, like entering a liminal space between our cultures yet joined by the earth and the art of creating. We were full of awe and amazement as we discovered a creation of knee high sculptures of Biblical figures such as Mary, Joseph, Thomas and even Santa Claus. One remaining sculpture from last year was tucked inside another bare room, looking like Mother Mary painted in pinks and blues, yet smaller in stature. The artists tell us that they are making their figures larger this year and have yet to paint them. These evolving art forms are to be placed in the Presepio on the 23rd of December. I was astonished to hear that the figures will disintegrate over the year, as they are not fired. All that creative expression will dissipate back into the earth.

This growing group of talented Timorese men, have been getting together since 2005 to create a Presepio from scratch each year as an entry into the National Presepio Competition. They are aiming for first prize of \$5000, after successfully winning \$1500

in 2012 for their Presepio.



They are working fervently for completion of their 21 figures to be featured in their hand built nativity scene this Christmas. The mud for the figures is collected from the nearby crocodile infested riverbanks. It is not exactly clay, but a mix of fine gravel and mud that has to be carefully picked through to remove larger stones. This is another risky endeavour for their art, as locals must be aware of the ever present danger of crocodiles. The group are untrained artists, so all the more reason for our surprise at their skill, teamwork and self-motivation.

We decided to visit the Presepio again one evening and ask permission to take photographs and interview the men so that we could share their extraordinary creations with others in Timor-Leste and in Australia. We were also accompanied by another Many Hands International volunteer, John Toumbourou and Many Hands International staff member Lucia Pichler, who lives and works in Lospalos.

The group agreed to share their story and one young man documented all names of the men involved:

Main Artists: Marcelio, Almerio, Ricoberto and Fracelino

Supporting Artists: Rojilpo, Marciano, Alderito, Juni, Ajito, Guilherme, Nicolao, Geordanio, Fredy, Yunus, Cornelio, Jerjio, Cardojo, Juanico and Jelawan.

Alderito, who served us in the Roberto Carlos Hotel café next door to the Presepio was willing to answer our many questions on his way to work on the sculptures with his friends. Kelly Seu, another Many Hands International volunteer from Australia, translated his Indonesian answers into English. He shared that he is a newcomer to this group, and after two years of experience he is curiously eager to keep learning from the gurus (guru means 'teacher' in Indonesian). He hopes to create his own figurine one year as he and the others in the group all learn from each other and from the making experience, by trial and error. He reflected that it is really hard to find the right mud; they have to dig deep down into the river, where they do see lots of crocodiles. But they know that the crocodiles usually live together and the artists know where they live!



This close-knit group of friends support each other through each step of the creative process, with planning meetings and lots of discussions on the ways to create the Presepio and the individual sculptures. Alderito imagined that the group will share the happiness if they win and make the local community proud of them. I was truly inspired by the innovation, creativity and community enterprising spirit of these young men. Maybe they're not all entirely driven by the chance to win, as they create art out of all natural materials to contribute to a religious festival that is important in Timor-Leste, with approximately 90% identifying as

being Catholic. Maybe the annual ritual to unite in building their Presepio and fine tuning their sculpting of such exquisite figures – keeps the spirit of Christmas alive, long after the mud figures have disintegrated.



*Many Hands International have an office based in Lospalos where they partner with staff from the Culture Department of Timor-Leste's Government at the Cultural Centre. Many Hands focus is to "take a cultural assets based approach to community and economic development. Many Hands believes that for many communities living in poverty or recovering from violent conflict, rebuilding cultural knowledge and practice is fundamental to achieving community health and wellbeing. They support activities that contribute to cultural, social, economic and environmental well-being. Through participatory and empowering processes, they assist communities to identify their cultural assets and to apply traditional knowledge in new and innovative ways to create economic and social opportunities".

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