

Playing pool at the Hard Rock Café

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From its ritzy new headquarters overlooking Lake Geneva, the World Intellectual Property Organization is the arm of the United Nations dedicated to ensuring that patents and trademarks are respected. On four occasions in the last decade, the Hard Rock Café organisation has asked the Organization to arbitrate when they learn of restaurants that pinch their name and logo.

What, I wondered, would the World Intellectual Property Organization make about the case of a Hard Rock Café operating in Oecusse, the exclave of Timor-Leste surrounded on all sides by Indonesia? The restaurant has the distinctive circular emblem and red lettered font on its frontage; it even sells Hard Rock Café Oecusse t-shirts (that are approximately the size of a small tent) but doesn't appear to be an official member of the franchise. Some questions should probably be asked of the owner and he shouldn't be too difficult to track down. He even comes relatively regularly to Geneva. And what is the name of this gentleman whose organisation shows such callous disrespect for copyright protection? His name is Ban Ki-Moon and he is the head of the United Nations.

The imposter Hard Rock Café is located inside the compound of one of the United Nations' farthest flung outposts. It is a place where bored international police officers challenge each other to game after game of pool for want of anything else to do.¹ One day I went there for lunch and came back five hours later, only to find the same two colleagues still locked in combat on the heavily scuffed felt. I have been there a bunch of times over the years and always marvel at the oddness of the place, serving pizzas, fries and tuna spaghetti. The free condom dispenser in the men's toilets seemed to be forever out of XL size and I never had the courage to ask anyone whether there was a good story behind this. It was a place of comfortable English-speaking familiarity in a land where that language is not normally spoken.

Tuesday night is DVD night and on almost every weekend there seems to be a send-off that takes place in an atmosphere of forlorn jollity. Hangdog talk about how the efforts of the United Nations and donors are coming to naught is the conversational mainstay. 'We're just not getting any *traction* here', said one woman using one of the favourite words in the development lexicon to bemoan the failures of East Timorese housewives to see benefits in the Orwellian sounding Community Mobilisation for Poverty Alleviation and Social Inclusion in Service Delivery project. 'It's just so hard convincing them to come to meetings', she continued, clearly figuring that cooking,

cleaning and feeding an army of kids – the average household is comprised of nine people – with few means wasn't work enough. She excused herself immediately after dinner; she needed to finish a report back to headquarters on how well the project was working. I fell into a conversation with a chain-smoking police officer who told me about his last trip to Bali.

It is in places like Oecusse where airy proclamations in the United Nations and faraway conference venues – talk of 'capacity building' and 'skills transfer' – meet uncomfortable reality. The demented pool players and their co-workers are the public face of what is called 'peace-building' or 'state-building', shorthand for rebuilding countries broken by internal conflict. There is a large industry of peace institutes and think-tanks around the world that produce earnest, jargon-filled manuals, toolkits, standards, guides and other procedural remedies to be used by those sent to places like Oecusse. Few of their products seem to have made it. The only reading materials I saw in Oecusse that evidenced signs of being read were tattered copies of the *Qantas* in-flight magazine. My unscientific survey of the denizens of the Hard Rock Café about which handbook they found most useful turned up blank looks and an appeal to shut up as the *Shrek 3* DVD was about to start.

The United Nations Police are stationed in the nearby station that they share with their East Timorese colleagues. The UN's role is to 'build the capacity' of the East Timorese law enforcers, but this is easier said than done. For a start, the United Nations Police and the East Timorese do not share a common language, which means they cannot even have a simple conversation with each other. Few skills seem to be transferred from one to the other beyond how to excel at smoking and mooching around. Although they shared the one building, there was oftentimes little interaction between them. The East Timorese police worked in their own offices or lounged outside under the shade of a eucalyptus tree, and their United Nations 'counterparts' sat in their own sections with better air conditioning and lamented the sluggishness of the internet connection. 'This slow net really is a drag', said one officer to me, taking a cigarette break from the hard work of calculating when he would accrue enough days to next go on holiday.

There were few common frames of reference even when conversation was mediated through an interpreter. I remember once watching the face of an East Timorese officer grow ever more bewildered as he heard tales of just how hard it is to keep a backyard swimming pool sufficiently chlorinated. The cost of the pool cleaning service was more than the East Timorese cop's monthly salary. The police in the main station were veritable paragons of industry compared to their partners located on the borderline with Indonesia. I went looking for a toilet at the frontier post one afternoon, walked in the wrong door and found the entire contingent of United Nations 'border police advisers' fast asleep at their desks.

The main challenge for both UNPOL and PNTL commanders is devising tasks for their officers to do. They have a parade and prayers every morning

at eight o'clock which passes about twenty minutes but, even allowing for a languid lunch, there is still a lot of time to fill until five in the afternoon. There is very little reported crime in Oecusse, a place with a population of 60,000 people; on average the police deal with less than one incident every two days. I once went out on patrol with the twenty member police 'Task Force' that is trained to respond to public order challenges. We clambered onto the back of their little pickup truck, drove the length and breadth of the wide boulevards of Pante Makassar, the main town in Oecusse, stopped to buy cigarettes along the way, and returned to the police station about ten minutes after we left it.

Not that there isn't any crime in Oecusse. There are sky-high rates of domestic violence and land dispute that can occasionally turn vicious. But victims rarely ask police officers to get involved. The majority of everyday disputes in Oecusse – as in other parts of the countryside – are still dealt with largely by informal and traditional means, rather than through a court. Ingrained allegiances and a dynamic mix of rituals, taboos, protocols, payments and social relationships remain more important than any uniform in enforcing order. So strong is the adherence to these injunctions that most Oecusse people maintain the prohibition on eating fish, eggs and coconut, even though these are among the most plentiful foods in a district in which people often go hungry. Their family name determines which foods they can eat and which foods they cannot. Some families don't consume fish out of deference to a bargain that warriors from Oecusse made in olden days with a sea monster that helped them across a swollen river. The creature – a freshwater kraken with the horns of a bull – helped them return to their lands safely in return for extracting a promise that neither the warriors nor their descendants would eat food that came from the river or the sea. I heard of everything from severe itching to calamitous injury being visited upon those who broke the promise. 'Can you believe that people eat fish from a can?', said one East Timorese police officer to me one day, clearly perplexed by the menu at the Hard Rock Café. 'I'd rather not eat than eat fish'. I relayed these stories to the denizens of the pool table and it was the first they'd heard of this. They rarely stepped out beyond their English speaking bubble.

Every time I visited Oecusse, I would learn a little more about these beliefs. They were hard to rationally square, but more deeply held and binding than any formal law or edict issued by the district administration or the government in Dili. Some articles of faith, such as the fish, had some parallel to Catholicism, the dominant religion, but much of the beliefs and customs have origins long before the arrival of missionaries. Most people in Oecusse have communication with their ancestors at least once-a-week, whose views on matters often take precedence to what official superiors might say.

As soon as I thought that I sort of understood the codes and customs in Oecusse, I would learn more stories and find myself entangled once more. This interplay between ancestors, land arrangements, prohibitions, and superstition was often oblique and changed according to unseen rules to

which I was not privy. Its logic was as opaque as the notion of ‘capacity building’ through osmosis that the UN was undertaking at the police station, albeit that custom appeared to deliver much more tangible results. The complex rituals and codes are hard for the outsiders to understand, especially if they are only here for a short time and can’t interact in order to find out more. No wonder so many international police officers find it much easier to retreat back to the pool table, baffled by and uncomprehending of the place to which they have been assigned.

Endnotes

- 1 After thirteen years, UNPOL are scheduled to withdraw from Oecusse in late 2012.