

Morning Tea for the
Husi Bei Ala Timor Sira Nia Liman Exhibition
SPEECH by His Honour Mr Tom Pauling AO QC
Administrator of the Northern Territory
Museum and Art Galleries of the NT – 11 March 2009

As official Patron of the Exhibition *Husi Bei Ala Timor Sira Nia Liman – From the Hands of Our Ancestors*, it is my pleasure to meet with you today to consider the significance of the Southeast Asian collection held by the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, in particular the items from Timor-Leste.

I trust you have all had the opportunity to view this Exhibition, currently on display in the Ken Waters Gallery. For those of you who have not, I strongly encourage you to do so as not only is it fascinating, but it also exemplifies the dynamic relations between the peoples of the Northern Territory and Timor-Leste.

As members of a regional community, we understand the benefits of exchange, reciprocity and partnership. An excellent example of the relationship between Timor-Leste and the Northern Territory was witnessed ten years ago. In 1999, a team of staff were sent to Dili to help retrieve artworks, relics and artefacts from the former Provincial Museum of East Timor which had been damaged during the violence there. From a total of 1,800 objects, 500 were salvaged and, today this collection forms the basis of the National Collection of Timor-Leste.

For the first time in this Exhibition, objects are internationally presented in conjunction with works from our own collection. This co-operative venture has only been possible due to strong working links between the two institutions. And, also, the willingness of the Government of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste to entrust us with rare and precious works for the duration of the Exhibition.

Positive interpersonal relationships are recognised as being central to innovative regional engagement. For example, the 2007 inaugural AusAID *Australian Leadership Awards Fellowship Program* enabled the Museum to host three staff from the National Directorate of Culture, Timor-Leste, for seven months. This forged a collaborative partnership, leading to capacity building of the Timor-Leste museum staff, and deepened the already solid working foundation between the two bodies.

It is worth considering the history of our Museum which resulted in it becoming custodian of one of the world's most significant collections of Timor-Leste artefacts. Indeed, the leading collection of Timor-Leste artefacts in a public Australian institution at this time.

Our Timor-Leste collection has been developed within the broader Southeast Asian Art and Material Culture collection since the institution's inception in 1965. Founding Director, Dr Colin Jack Hinton's interest in Southeast Asian and Pacific history and archaeology focused on the study of Portuguese and Spanish expansion and maritime history. Fluent in Portuguese, it is not surprising that his first overseas fieldtrip, in his capacity as Museum Director, was to 'Portuguese Timor'.

During that visit in August 1972, he acquired a significant collection of earthenware ceramics from Manatuto along with Timorese textiles, *tais* and baskets. These 65 objects formed part of the first Southeast Asian collection – which today totals over four thousand items.

Over the years, Museum staff - Mike Gunn, Fiona Liebrick, Peter Spillett and James Bennett - undertook field trips in East Timor, occasionally making field acquisitions. In addition, generous local community members thoughtfully donated objects acquired in Timor whilst working, holidaying or sailing in the region.

The cultural material held at this Museum has become highly significant following the extensive loss of cultural material experienced in Timor-Leste in recent decades. Unfortunately during times of war, cultural objects and sacred

relics often become targets of destruction and this case was no exception. The Museum's collection is therefore exceedingly rare and unique.

Since 2006, Southeast Asian Art and Material Culture Curator, Joanna Barrkman, has actively worked to build our institution's holdings from Timor-Leste. Acquisitions have focused on contemporary artworks such as textiles, body adornment carvings and ceramics. This strategy illustrates the Museum's commitment to documenting our immediate region's rich and diverse cultures. It also enables the Museum to acknowledge Timorese artisans, craftspeople and emerging artists and in doing so provides impetus for them to continue producing artworks and craft in what are often challenging social and economic situations.

It is fitting that the process of creating this exhibition has strengthened working relationships between our two cultural institutions, as well as having the lasting benefit of improving existing collections of Timor-Leste cultural material. It is after all the collections that are the heart of cultural institutions. In time they will act as a reminder to following generations of our existence, accomplishments, beliefs and challenges.

In the case of Timor-Leste, I believe that these collections remind us of the dignified traditions of our Timorese neighbours. They inspire our resolve to contribute to the preservation, documentation and collection of Timorese cultural material in our region by developing an eminent Timor-Leste collection for the benefit of future generations.