

SECRETS
OF THE

MUTIS HONEY HUNTERS



RESEARCH
PROGRAM ON
Forests, Trees and
Agroforestry



This book is published by Kanoppi through the CIFOR team



Timber and Non-timber Products in Integrated Production and Marketing Systems (*Kayu dan Non-kayu dalam Sistem Produksi dan Pemasaran yang Terintegrasi – Kanoppi*)

Kanoppi is a research project funded by ACIAR (Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research) that has been coordinated by ICRAF (The World Agroforestry Centre) and CIFOR (Center for International Forestry Research) since 2013. Kanoppi's research objectives are to identify, enhance and expand forest community involvement in managing forestry products to improve livelihoods through integrated production and marketing systems at the household and landscape levels. Research is being conducted in Sumbawa District, West Nusa Tenggara Province; South Central Timor District, East Nusa Tenggara Province; and Gunung Kidul District, Yogyakarta Special Region.

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OLIN FOBIA STORYTELLERS

This story book is based on traditions and folk tales passed down for generations by the Olin Fobia people in Bonleu Village, and other clans in South Central Timor, Indonesia.

These traditions have been practiced for hundreds of years. As some Olin Fobia traditions and tales are beginning to disappear, the Kanoppi Project and CIFOR are striving to document them before they do. Furthermore, this book aims to motivate the younger generation to become involved in efforts to preserve forests, and to protect forest flora and fauna and their habitats.

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-  **Christina Pilis**
The Olin Fobia community guardian of traditional houses, Bonleu Village, South Central Timor
-  **Cornelis Fallo**
The Olin Fobia community customary land guardian (*Tobe*), Bonleu Village, Mount Mutis, South Central Timor
-  **David A.N. Fina**
Anthropologists from Yayasan Alfa Omega in Kupang.
-  **Hermon Babu**
Olin Fobia community ground-based honey harvesters (*Meo Menesat*), Bonleu Village, South Central Timor
-  **Johanes Tefa**
Santa Maria Diangkat ke Surga Catholic Church in Eban Village, North Central Timor
-  **Joni Babu**
Olin Fobia community tree-climbing honey harvesters (*Meo One*), Bonleu Village, South Central Timor
-  **Melki Fobia**
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-  **Ris Oematan**
Olin Fobia community tree-climbing honey harvesters, Bonleu Village, South Central Timor
-  **Simon Fallo**
The Olin Fobia community customary land guardian, Bonleu Village, South Central Timor
-  **Sipri Fallo**
Olin Fobia community ground-based honey harvesters, Bonleu Village, South Central Timor
-  **Mutis Timau communities**



In the Mount Mutis valley

Near the Bonlevu rock and Nainman hills



Live a group of people with a tradition of hunting

They are neither deer hunters nor wild boar hunters

They are the hunters of forest honey

The honey hunters are not greedy

They are forbidden to carry cruelty in their hearts

If they fail to be good

A terrible fate will befall them

Only with pure hearts

Can they hunt honey in the Mutis Forest

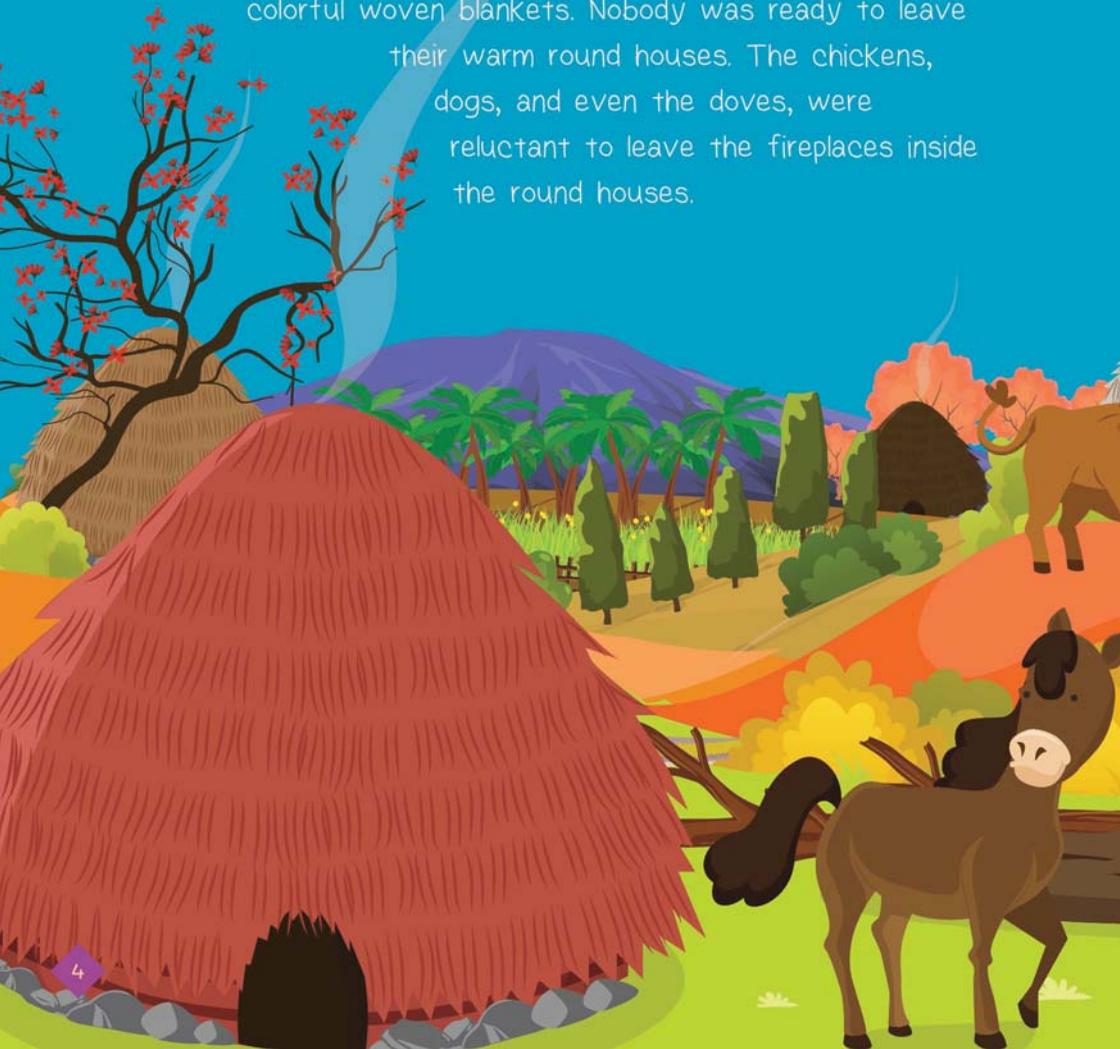
(Timor, Antae Tasi moon, 2016)





The morning sun was shining on the little village of Bonleu at the foot of Mount Mutis. The eastern star began to fade, swallowed up by the bright morning light. Birds chattered merrily as the grass at the top of Nainman Hill shone golden. The morning sun cast shadows of trees over the fields of grass; long shadows, showing it was 5 o'clock in the morning in Bonleu.

But the June morning sun could not stop the chilly east wind. The people of Bonleu Village crouched, huddled up in their colorful woven blankets. Nobody was ready to leave their warm round houses. The chickens, dogs, and even the doves, were reluctant to leave the fireplaces inside the round houses.



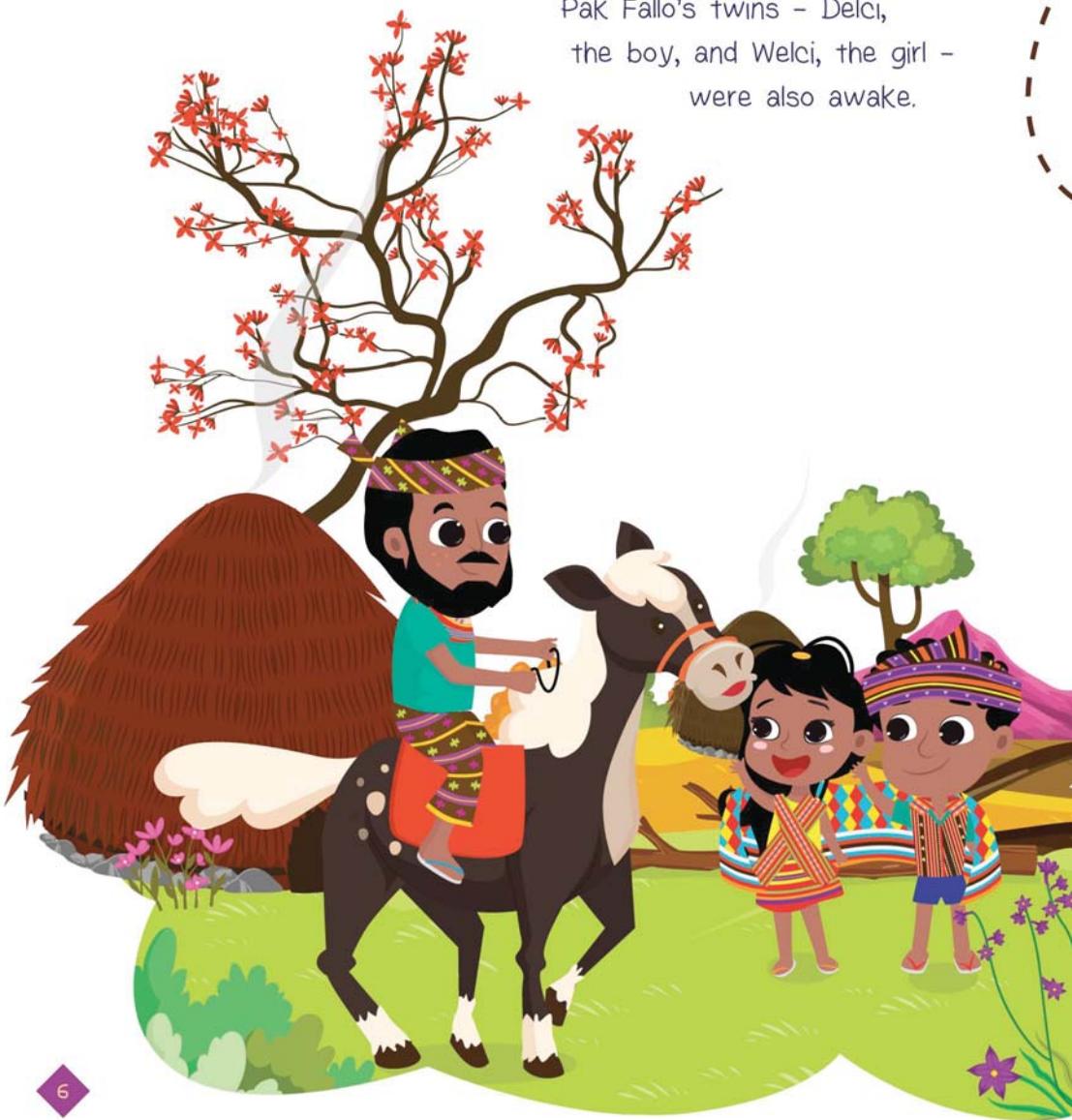
Bonleu Village was home to the Olin Fobia people; a well-known community of honey hunters. They lived in mushroom-shaped round houses called Uim Bubu, where the fireplace would blaze night and day. The round houses and their fireplaces warmed the Olin Fobia community from the cold east wind and the Mutis Mountain air.

But one round house had been bustling before sunrise. It was the house of Pak Fallo, a tough Bonleu honey hunter, who was busy packing his bags with corn and boiled bananas. That morning, Pak Fallo was going to the Mount Mutis Forest to check on the bee trees belonging to the Olin Fobia community.



Bee trees are trees that hold bee nests. The bee trees of the Olin Fobia community were in a place called Suf Fabinessi, half a day away from Bonleu Village on horseback. Pak Fallo was an excellent rider, and liked riding horses to check bee trees.

Pak Fallo's twins – Delci, the boy, and Welci, the girl – were also awake.





Delci was born fifteen minutes before Welci, so he was considered Welci's elder brother. That day was Delci and Welci's twelfth birthday, so they were looking forward to their birthday surprise.

"What is our birthday gift, Papa?" asked the twins.

"Your birthday gift is that you are both allowed to come honey hunting with me in Fabinessi," PaK Fallo replied.

"Hooray! At last, we can go honey hunting. I want to see the beautiful Fabinessi Forest," Welci said excitedly. They had been waiting for an invitation to go honey hunting ever since they were small.



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A WARM UIM BUBU

For the Olin Fobia people, round houses are the best-shaped homes. The east wind, which blows from June to August, always brings cold air from the Australian winter. Under the *Uim Bubu*'s thick grass roofs and tightly closed walls, the Olin Fobia people feel warm and sheltered from the cold east wind.

Before the advent of *Uim Bubu* round houses, the Olin Fobia's ancestors lived in caves close to springs or rivers. Their ancestors died in those very caves and springs. Every family in the Olin Fobia community has a cave and water it deems sacred, which refers to the origin of its ancestors. Entrances to *Uim Bubu* round houses are always made facing the direction of the ancestral cave and water.



"I want to see Papa climb a tall bee tree," said Delci. Pak Fallo laughed on hearing Delci and Welci cheering excitedly.

"Right then. You can both help Mama prepare supplies for hunting honey. I'll go to Suf Fabinessi first to check on our bee trees," Pak Fallo said ending the morning's happy conversation.

"Don't forget to graze the cows and horses!" Pak Fallo rode away leaving Delci and Welci behind.

Every year in June, Bonleu Village would buzz with excitement. June was the month everyone looked forward to because the white paperbark eucalyptus trees, also called *ampupu*, on Mount Mutis would come into flower. Bees would buzz busily collecting nectar and turning it into honey in their nests. The bees liked to build nests on *ampupu* tree branches. Not in all *ampupu* trees, but only in a select few.

The Olin Fobia people believed bees were called by the ancestral spirits to make nests in *ampupu* trees. They would only call if the Olin Fobia people looked after the Mutis Forest and were not greedy. Pleasing the ancestral spirits was important to keep honey plentiful. The honey hunters of Olin Fobia were not allowed to carelessly harvest honey. They had to hold a ceremony for their ancestors led by Bapa Tobe, the customary land guardian.

Bapa Tobe was the honey-hunt leader. In addition to asking the ancestors for consent, he would also decide when would be the right time to go hunting. No one dared to go against what Bapa Tobe said. If Bapa Tobe said today was the day to hunt honey, then that would be the day the Olin Fobia community would go honey hunting. If they did not follow Bapa Tobe's advice, disaster could befall them.

Pak Fallo returned home that evening and invited the whole Olin Fobia community to gather in Bapa Tobe's round house. Everybody gathered to hear Pak Fallo's findings and Bapa Tobe's directions. Pak Fallo invited Delci and Welci to come along.

"Have you seen the drops of honey in the bush below the bee trees?" Bapa Tobe asked Pak Fallo.

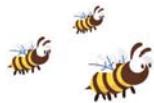




"I have, Bapa Tobe. There are many drops of honey there," replied Pak Fallo.

"Hmm, that means the honey is ready for harvest. Tomorrow we'll go hunting!," Bapa Tobe exclaimed.

"We'll hold a Naketi ceremony tonight. I will prepare the *tobe* basket for honey-hunting offerings," Bapa Tobe went on. A 'tobe' is a small basket woven out of lontar leaves. Lontar palms did not grow on Mount Mutis; they grew far away along the coast. So, *tobe* baskets were special items for the Olin Fobia people. They used them as containers for offerings. The leaders of the honey-hunting ceremonies were called 'Tobe' because they would use *tobe* baskets when making offerings to the ancestral spirits.



During the Naketi ceremony, all the Olin Fobia people apologized to each other to free them from greed. Naketi ceremonies were held because Olin Fobia people believed that the Mount Mutis Forest was a sacred ground. They considered the forest to be the source of life-giving food, water, medicine, aromatic sandalwood and sweet honey. Honey hunters had to be pure hearted when they harvested honey in the Mutis Forest. They could not be indebted to others.

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HORSES, CATTLE AND MUTIS FOREST



Buffaloes, pigs and chickens are native to Timor. Timorese people have kept buffaloes for thousands of years. Olin Fobia people call buffaloes 'Bijae Meto'. Horses are not native to Timor and were introduced by the Portuguese in the 1500s. For that reason, Olin Fobia people call them 'Bijae Kase' or 'Bakase', meaning 'foreigners' buffaloes'. Horses reproduced rapidly in Timor on the island's abundant grasslands. They became an important mode of transport before the arrival of motor vehicles.

In 1905, Dutch colonizers brought Bali cattle to Timor as gifts for Timorese princes. Fine grasslands meant cattle reproduced quickly. Forests became filled with cattle, but were damaged as a result, because the cattle trampled newly germinated *ampupu* trees. Ironically, the Olin Fobia people protect forests from fires for the sake of cattle and horses, which need grass from the forest during the dry season. Cattle and horses are thought to hamper the survival of young *ampupu* crops. If *ampupu* trees become extinct, then bees will no longer be able to nest in them.

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NO HONEY HARVESTS

IN THE RAINY SEASON



Forests on Mount Mutis have a variety of eucalyptus species: mainly white paperbark (*Eucalyptus alba*) and *ampupu* (*E. urophylla*) trees. Many white paperbark and *ampupu* trees grow on the lower slopes of Mount Mutis. White paperbark trees flower in the dry season, and when they bloom, bees collect nectar from the white paperbark flowers.



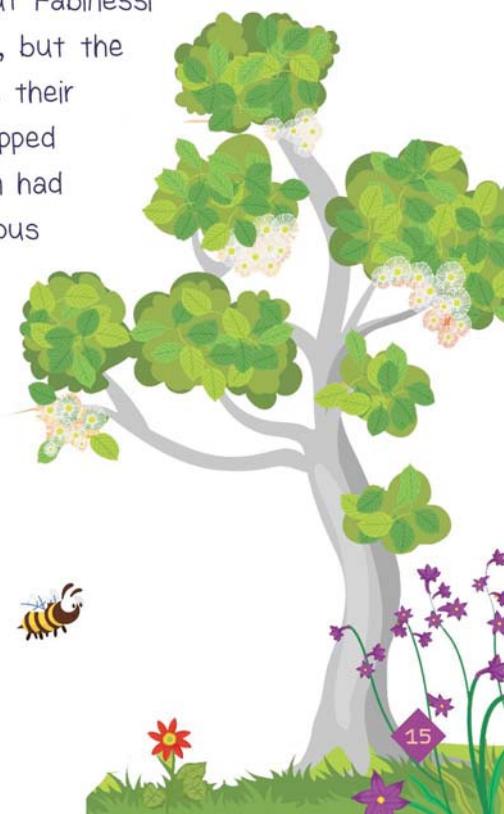
However, bees do not nest in white paperbark trees; they choose to nest in *ampupu* trees.

Ampupu trees also grow on high mountain slopes, and flower during the rainy season.

Ampupu flowers are food sources for honey bees, which move higher up the mountain in the rainy season. Bees nest in *ampupu* trees growing in ravines, which are extremely slippery in the rainy season. Thick fog also restricts visibility. Olin Fobia people do not harvest honey in the rainy season.

On the following morning, the Olin Fobia people busily prepared themselves for the honey hunt. Rice, corn, sweet potatoes, cassava, smoked pork, dried buffalo meat, pots and pans, buckets and jerry cans were all packed into gunny sacks. Delci and Welci were told to look after the pig they would sacrifice during the honey-hunting ceremony. Their job was to feed it during the journey. Honey hunting would take two or three weeks. The Olin Fobia people would set up forest camps when they went hunting honey, and would take plenty of supplies.

The gunny sacks were loaded into an open-backed truck. The children and grownups sat in the back of the truck whilst Bapa Tobe sat beside the driver. The Olin Fobia people sang happily the whole way. Going honey hunting was like going on holiday to a beautiful forest. The Suf Fabinessi Forest could be reached in six hours, but the Olin Fobia people were happy to take their time enjoying the journey. They stopped in the grasslands to eat. The women had cooked rice and prepared some delicious smoked pork. They spent the night in the grasslands, sleeping under the star-filled sky, lit up by the *Antae Tasi* moon.





The *Antae Tasi* moon was a half moon. The Olin Fobia people believed the *Antae Tasi* moon was going home to the sea.

The night was cold in the grasslands. The men warmed themselves up by drinking hot coffee. Delci helped Bapa Tobe put on his woven blanket. Delci admired the clever Bapa Tobe, and had long yearned to ask him something. Delci plucked up the courage to ask Bapa Tobe.

“Bapa Tobe, why do we only harvest honey in June?” asked Delci. “I want to harvest honey all the time.”

“Oh, that’s because bees are forever moving home, Delci. From August to November, when the lontar and Kesambi trees are flowering, the bees move from Fabinessi to the coast. In December, they come back to Mount Mutis when the *ampupu* trees are in flower.





Unfortunately, we can't harvest honey in August and December. Do you know why?" asked Bapa Tobe.

"Hmm, because I wouldn't want to go to Mount Mutis when it rains heavily in December. It must be very cold. I wouldn't want to go to the coast either, it is so far from Bonleu," answered Delci.

"Clever boy. When you're older, you'll be a Tobe!" said Bapa Tobe, praising Delci.

The Olin Fobia people were happy when they finally arrived at the Suf Fabinessi Forest. They gazed in wonder at the trees full of bee nests. They could see why their ancestors had paid the Amfoang people two pieces of silver and two buffaloes for Suf Fabinessi and its valuable bee trees. At that time, Javanese, Chinese and Portuguese sailors sought beeswax to sell for high prices in Chinese Macau.



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VALUABLE BEE\$WAX AND HONEY BEE\$



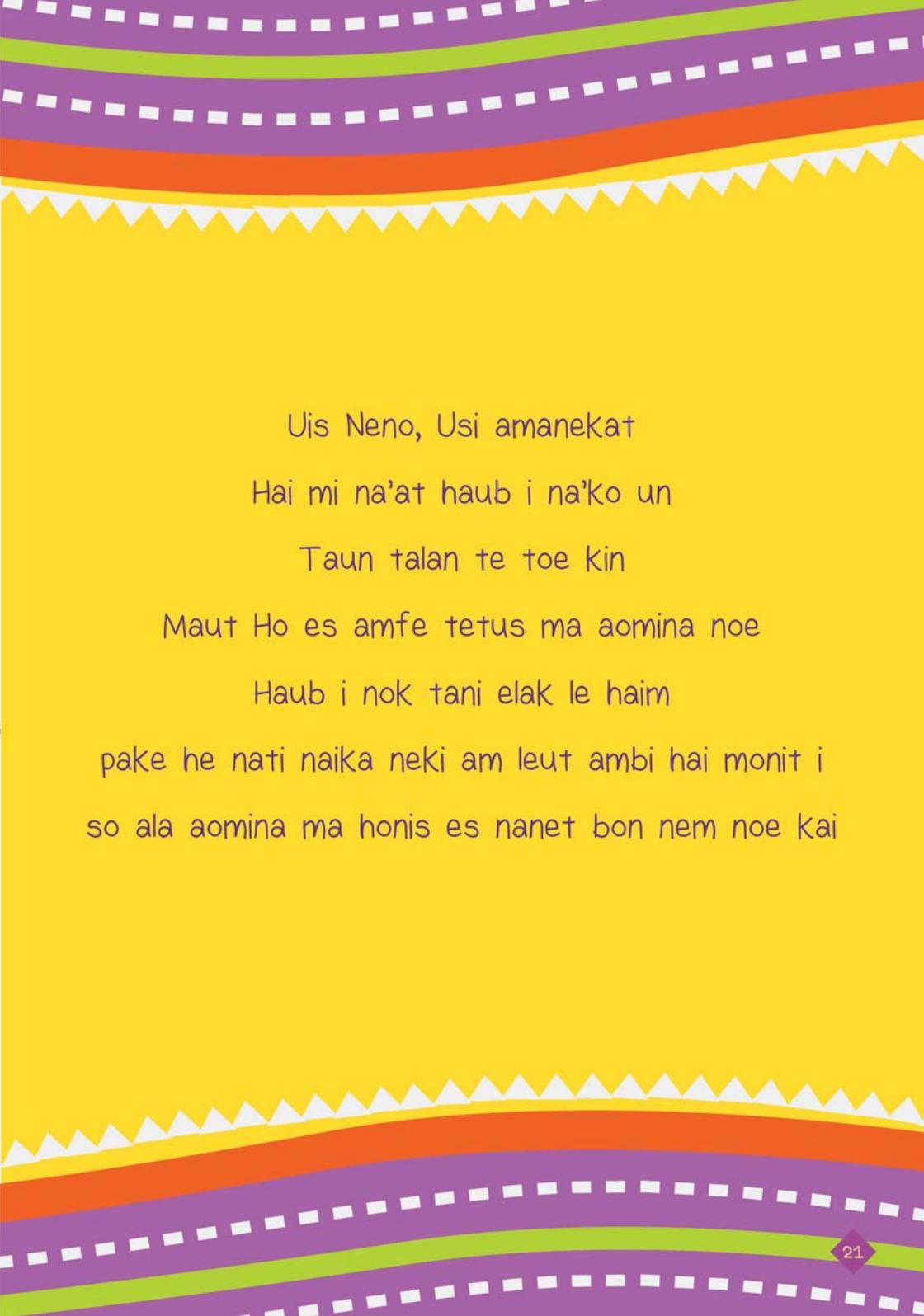
Sandalwood, beeswax and honey have been important trade goods from Timor since the days of the Sriwijaya and Majapahit kingdoms. There were beeswax trading ports on the island even before the arrival of the Portuguese. One of these ports was in Ambeno, which is now part of East Timor. Traditionally, a

tribal chief would receive *ninik abas* tributes in the form of beeswax and rolls of kapok twine. The Catholic Church made candles from beeswax up until the 1960s. Honey still retains its high value because large cities in Indonesia buy it from the Mutis Forest. Every year the Mutis Forest produces 30 tons of honey.

Beeswax was not as important as it used to be in the old days, so city traders now sought for valuable honey. That is why the Olin Fobia people looked after Suf Fabinessi Forest: to ensure a sustainable supply of honey. Centuries old *ampupu* trees were never cut down. *Ampupu* trees in Suf Fabinessi were left standing and could reach 50 meters tall. Honey bees would build nests in the branches of *ampupu* trees, and one tree could have 10 honey-filled bee nests measuring 60 centimeters.

When they arrived at the entrance of Fabinessi Forest, Bapa Tobe told the Olin Fobia community to slaughter the sacrificial pig. Bapa Tobe took a piece of meat and placed it in the *tobe* container with a few grains of rice and a silver coin as an offering. Bapa Tobe hummed a mantra that only he and the ancestral spirit guardians of the Mutis Forest could hear. Then he prayed to God, the ruler of the skies, asking for permission and safe passage for the Olin Fobia people throughout the honey hunt.





Uis Neno, Usi amanekat
Hai mi na'at haub i na'ko un
Taun talan te toe kin
Maut Ho es amfe tetus ma aomina noe
Haub i nok tani elak le haim
pake he nati naika neki am leut ambi hai monit i
so ala aomina ma honis es nanet bon nem noe kai

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FORESTS DIVIDED INTO "SUF'S"



Fabinessi Forest is only a small part of the Mount Mutis Forest, which belongs to many communities. The king or *Usif* organized how the Mutis Forest region would be shared out. Sandalwood and honey from the forest have been valuable trading commodities since ancient times. Every tribe was granted a forest region, called a 'suf'. Each tribe also has different honey-hunting traditions.

Suf regions are overseen by *Tobes*, who preserve them for honey bees. No one is allowed to cut down trees in the *suf*, but if someone does, the person responsible must plant ten trees. Hunting wildlife is also prohibited. Olin Fobia customs say that men are *suf* landowners, while women own bee trees. The most important thing is that the *suf* cannot be bought or sold. *Tobes* will revoke rights over *sufs* if tribes sell *suf* land.

The Olin Fobia community waited solemnly while Bapa Tobe spoke with the ancestral spirits. They were relieved when he told them they had permission. As an expression of gratitude, the women cooked the pig for the feast. Welci helped her mother fetch water from the spring. Delci and the other boys helped collect bamboo to make ladders. Everyone was busy preparing tools for harvesting: ropes, machetes, buckets and smoke wood. Smoke wood is made up of twigs and damp leaves burned to produce smoke.

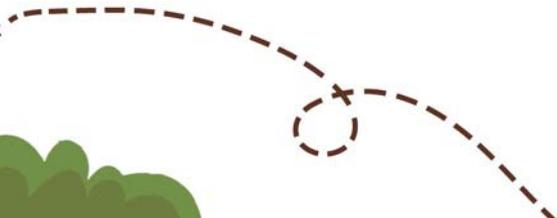
Now, hunting for forest honey is not an easy job. Honey hunters have to be as brave as commanders on a battlefield; ready to bear pain from bee stings without complaint and brave enough to climb very high trees without fear of falling.



Moreover, honey hunting is done at night. As the honey hunters are extremely brave and tough, they are called *Meo*, which means 'warlord'.

The bee nests were high up the *ampupu* trees. During the daytime, Pak Fallo and the other hunters would make bamboo ladders. These ladders were tied to the trunks of the trees and connected upwards until they reached heights of 40 meters. When connecting the bamboo ladders, Pak Fallo would only rest on his big toes. With his left hand, he would hug the tree whilst flicking the rope around the trunk with his right, then catch it again with his left. It was very difficult, especially because *ampupu* trees stand straight upright. Sweat poured down Pak Fallo's back. His legs and back ached as he made the ladders, but honey hunters had to work tirelessly.

During the night time, Pak Fallo would climb back up the trees to cut down the honey-filled bee nests. The nights were dark, so the bees were not aware of the honey hunters in their midst. In the darkness, Delci and Welci would anxiously watch their father standing on the high *ampupu* branches wafting smoke wood to drive the bees out from their nests. The bees would buzz away, and some of them would sting Pak Fallo. But Pak Fallo would not cry out in pain, he would sing a mantra to calm the bees. Delci and Welci, and all the others down below, would join in with the mantra so Pak Fallo would be safe, and the bees would not get angry.



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WHO ARE THE OLIN FOBIA PEOPLE?



Timorese people are the descendents of Austro-Asiatic, Melanesian and Austronesian immigrants. Austro-Asiatic people are thought to have arrived around 35,000 years ago, bringing a stone age culture with them. Around 2000 years BCE, Melanesian people from Papua came to Timor, bringing traditions of round-house building and banana growing. The arrival of Austronesian-speaking people in

the early years of the Current Era pushed the earlier inhabitants into the island's mountainous interior. The Austronesian people later called the original inhabitants of Timor '*Atoni Meto*', meaning mountain dwellers. Many *Atoni Meto* people, including the Olin Fobia, live in the Mutis and Babnaim mountains. *Atoni Meto* people are strong and muscular.





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HARDWORKING GIANT BEES



The honey harvested by the Olin Fobia community come from nectar collected by giant *Apis dorsata* bees. *Apis dorsata* are bigger than other bee species measuring 3–4.5 centimeters long. Giant *dorsata* bees are not aggressive; they are sociable and work together to look for food. They like seeking nectar in flowering trees.

Tree vegetation produces more flowers than scrubs and grasslands. Giant *dorsata* bees need around 18 minutes to gather nectar and pollen from one flower. They choose nectar that is high in fructose and other sugars. Giant *dorsata* bees can produce as much as 3–5 kilograms of honey in one nest.

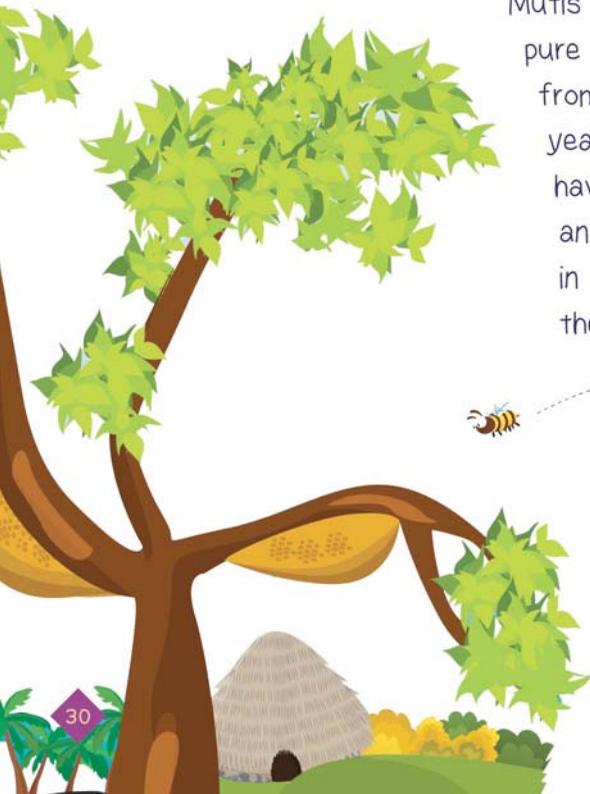
One-by-one, the bee nests were cut. Those full of honey were placed in buckets tied to ropes and lowered to the ground. The harvest would only stop at daybreak.



Two weeks later, the honey harvest in Suf Fabinessi Forest was over. Pak Fallo and the other hunters had harvested a lot of honey. The Olin Fobia community thanked the bees and the ancestral spirits who had given them honey. Thanks to the honey bees in the Mutis Forest, Delci and Welci could eat taro smothered with honey. The Olin Fobia people could enjoy hot coffee and honey on cold evenings. The honey hunters would also get money for their children's schooling. The honey bees in the Mutis Forest gave happiness and prosperity to the Olin Fobia people.

Bapa Tobe closed the honey hunt by singing a thanksgiving mantra calling the bees to return to the trees belonging to the Olin Fobia people.

It seems the bees and the guardian spirits of the sacred Mutis Forest liked the mantras and pure hearts of the honey hunters from Bonleu. For hundreds of years, the white paperbark trees have remained thick with flowers, and honey bees continue to nest in the *ampupu* trees belonging to the Olin Fobia people.





Tani jama Elak

(Rope and Wood)

Neten ko apao eno

(Ready wood twine for the gate keeper)

Feto obe tup sam kababeat

(Bees, be calm, sleep soundly)

Suni sium la liube habetun

(Sparks from swords, light up all the tree's branches)

Mau pul fani tahik no bat nolat

(Bee nests, we'll store you in Ta'an-honey pots)

Hau keon besi atul taok tuaf

(Strong branches, support the Meo)

Bi hve sufa amoe' bael kase

(White paperbark flowers, provide nectar for bees)

Amnan pupu aumat kote luman

(Harvested bees, return to empty nests)

Tabokan feto fen ka nait ike suti

(Bees, your hard work has been taken away, bees, go home empty; take
no honey to the other trees)

Feto obe tup sam kababeat

(Bees, be calm, sleep soundly)







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MOUNT MUTIS

The highest mountain on Timor, Mount Mutis, is the source of eight rivers that provide fresh water for the island of Timor. Timorese people believe all tribes in Timor originate from Mount Mutis. According to folk tales, the first ruler of Timor lived on the eastern

slopes of Mount Mutis around the regions of Fatunesuan, Eban near Bonleu and Kefamenanu. The ruler was named Nai Ke Kune. Mount Mutis is considered hallowed ground because it is an ancestral home and a source of life-giving water.



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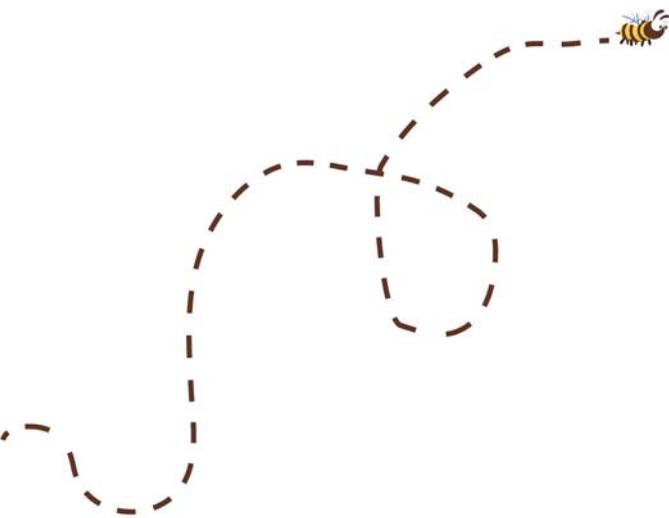
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Kanoppi Project research notes and documentation by the CIFOR and WWF Indonesia Coral Triangle Program Research Team (Ani Adiwinata Nawir, Philip Manalu, Yeni F. Nomeni and Firkan Maulana):

- Reports on customary honey harvesting processions on Mount Mutis, South Central Timor district, east Nusa Tenggara province
- SUF Research: Analyses of links between clan-based land ownership (*suf*) and application of formal rules in the Mutis Timau landscape
- Notes from interviews with Isak Fobia, customary chief of the Olin Fobia community
- Video documentation in the Mutis Timau Forest, east Nusa Tenggara:
 - Madu Hutan Mutis Timau: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OOxpBPWLax0>
- Nyanyian Untuk One: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7QI3zwpBejM>
- The Honey Harvesters: Tradition and landscape management in West Timor: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qR-WFOYju94>





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The CGIAR Research Program on Forests, Trees and Agroforestry (FTA) is the world's largest research for development program to enhance the role of forests, trees and agroforestry in sustainable development and food security and to address climate change. CIFOR leads FTA in partnership with Bioversity International, CATIE, CIRAD, ICRAF, INBAR and TBI.



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