



## Place-making and the Timor-Leste Nation-Building Project

Angie Bexley and Maj Nygaard-Christensen

If the tendency in anthropology and area studies has been to move away from associations between 'the field' and bounded communities, political processes in Timor-Leste have been marked by attempts to demarcate the boundaries of, and to define the place, that would become 'Timor-Leste'. Or put differently, while anthropological debates have abandoned "the common sense idea that such things as locality and community are simply given or natural" and instead turned "toward a focus on social and political processes of place making",<sup>1</sup> such processes in Timor-Leste have often revolved around making essentialist claims about what constitutes Timorese national identity.

The chapters in our 2017 volume, *Fieldwork in Timor-Leste: Understanding Social Change Through Practice* (NIAS Press), go to the heart of these tensions. Initially, our aim with the volume was to collect chapters that reflected on ethnographic fieldwork practices in the country. What emerged from this process, however, were not only reflections on the fieldwork process itself but also a critical engagement with some of the preconceived ideas about what kind of place Timor-Leste is, and which also challenged the ethnographic or historical research of the contributing authors. The volume therefore also offers a series of attempts to unravel or destabilise some of these understandings of Timor-Leste and its history. Together, they highlight the contestations and deliberations that have been symptomatic of the nation building process itself.

David Hicks and Andrew McWilliam offer a window into Timor-Leste at different points in

time both through analyses of traditional power structures and political systems. David Hicks' chapter offers a personal account of fieldwork in Portuguese Timor (1702-1975), and his efforts to renew relationships with informants after several decades in a community now busy transitioning into a market economy. Hicks further highlights how the transition to independence has been accompanied by a shift in perceptions of tradition, previously surrounded by secrecy and shame, to a local re-engagement with tradition, encouraged by the broader project of nation-building. Andrew McWilliam's chapter reflects on the serendipitous nature of identifying a 'field' over time, through a mix of chance and opportunity and, in the early years of independence, supported by the broad popular willingness of people to "reflect on the tumultuous events of the recent times and challenges of rebuilding".

An analysis of undocumented decapitated Timorese skulls found in the Coimbra Museum of Portugal offers a different perspective of Portuguese Timor. The archival void surrounding their history led Roque on a search for what he terms "archival traces"

resulting in extensive fieldwork in public and private archives. While Portuguese sources assessed the skulls as representative of exotic indigenous warfare practices in which Portugal played no part, Roque's research demonstrates the complication of Portuguese colonial dichotomies, and also inspires a rethink about Timorese history and engagement with external political projects more broadly.

Douglas Kammen and Judith Bovensiepen's contributions both challenge the divisions of urban and rural Timor-Leste, often accompanied by associated divisions of 'modernity' and tradition, urban being the focus of analysis of conflict, crises, and politics, and rural being the site of study for community, tradition, and resilience. Through extensive archival research, Kammen traces contemporary understandings of Timorese rural societies to the making of administrative boundaries and divisions during Portuguese colonialism and challenges the meaning of it as a bounded community, an understanding which further underpins contemporary accounts of 'revival of tradition'. He takes the smallest unit, the *suco* (village level administrative unit) and challenges the meaning as a relatively bounded community, an understanding which underpins contemporary accounts of 'revival of tradition'.

Through combined ethnographic and historical research, Judith Bovensiepen demonstrates how inter-party struggles were based on existing political disputes, which had in turn also been shaped through engagement with Portuguese colonial administration. She shows how official as well as international and academic narratives that pit pro-integrationist and pro-independence supporters against each other often overlook the complexity of how allegiances and alliances came into being.

Maj Nygaard-Christensen and Pyone Myat Thu contest the idea of Timorese conflict as either externally generated or purely domestic in nature. Thu's chapter does this by examining the local dynamics of tension in rural Baucau districts, which arose through Indonesian resettlement programs under occupation. Thu narrates the experience of conducting fieldwork in an environment characterised by deep distrust and encourages us to pay attention to "what is left unsaid, as much as what is said". Nygaard-Christensen's chapter shows how local political dramas that have filled the post-independence years, and at first sight only seem to confirm Timor-Leste's fragility, were often co-produced by the massive international presence the country has hosted after independence.

The final three chapters by Angie Bexley, Guteriano Neves and Amy Rothschild offer examples of how positionality impacts upon ethnographic research and directs our attention in the field. Arriving in Timor-Leste initially as an Indonesian speaker, Bexley came to understand the multiple meanings

of Indonesia for young Timorese, from pop culture to politics, which disrupted monolithic representations of Indonesia. Young Timorese were excluded from the new nation-state and their connections to Indonesia dubbed them the 'Supermi Generation' by the nation's elite – a reference to Indonesia's instant noodles and implying a lack of strength and leadership. They were subsequently denied a legitimate stake as citizens in the new nation-state.

Neves reflects on the challenges faced by Timorese scholars researching their own society, including issues relating to access and never 'exiting' the field. He demonstrates how a level of engagement with state politics is not restricted to urban elites, as remote rural communities are also intensely invested in state politics and the politics of international aid. Rothschild's analysis highlights the tensions surrounding Timorese history-making and also examines notions of ownership among foreigners working in Timor-Leste. The starting point of her analysis was her failure to gain access to a field site she had hoped would shed light on Timorese memories of violence during the occupation. She not only raises the question of who has the right to grant or disallow access to particular sites, but also demonstrates how 'local' projects of history-making in a new nation such as Timor-Leste are intensely entangled with international ones.

Timor-Leste has been marked as much by contestation and rupture as it has been by consensus and continuity. The emerging areas of study in post-independence Timor-Leste do not simply replace 'continuity' with a focus on 'rupture', but rather highlight the ambivalences that have characterised Timorese engagements with, for instance, tradition, foreign influences, and colonial heritage and emphasises the heterogeneous ways in which our informants relate to those. Through focusing on moments of crises, claims to community and the social production of historical, social and territorial categories, researchers are inspiring analytical engagements of how the nation has been socially produced, contested and understood and continue to question the categories through which we have come to understand Timor-Leste.

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### Notes

- 1 Gupta, A. & Ferguson, J. 1997. *Anthropological Locations. Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*. University of California Press, p.6



Top left: 'Recovering Lives' (2008) produced by Culture Kitchen, a collaboration between Indonesian, Timorese and Australian artists.  
Above: This is a detail of the top-left image.