

# Anthropology in Timor-Leste

## Highlights from the last twenty years

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I will organize the works presented here by the countries where the research was produced: Australia, Brazil, Portugal, Timor-Leste. Also, as a final summary I will reflect on some of the most important features that the research has predominantly focused on.

### Australian anthropology

One of the indisputable epicenters of anthropological research on Timor is located in Australia, more specifically at the Australian National University (ANU). A key figure is James J. Fox, who, through his students, has had a major influence on anthropological studies of Timor-Leste. Fox pioneered anthropological research at the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies (RSPAS), where many scholars completed their doctoral dissertations on Eastern Indonesia.

Among those students, one who did fieldwork in West Timor was Andrew McWilliam. Now at Western Sydney University, he has conducted fieldwork among the Fataluku ethnolinguistic group and has published extensively on many topics, such as customary access to land, economy, and identity. While at ANU, he also co-supervised Angie Bexley's doctoral research. In her 2009 thesis (*Youth at the Crossroads: The Politics of Identity and Belonging in Timor-Leste*), she explores the mechanisms that Timorese youth employ to express and create new identities differentiated from the victimization and politicization of previous generations that struggled for independence.<sup>1</sup> Michael Rose was another of McWilliam's students at ANU who did his 2017 doctoral dissertation with the Oecussi enclave as the ethnographic background. Entitled *Between Kase (Foreign) and Meto (Indigenous). Highland Spirits and Global Aspirations in the Oecussi Enclave*, Rose explores a theme with a long tradition in the anthropological literature of the Eastern Indonesian region: that of binary oppositions and how these modulate

the idea of Timorese nationality and give meaning to large infrastructure projects.

Also at ANU, Dionisio Babo-Soares, a Timorese national, worked on his doctoral thesis (*Branching from the Trunk: East Timorese Perceptions of Nationalism in Transition*, 2003) on Timorese perceptions of their political history and national identity. Later, he also became interested in the political and legal construction of the Timorese State and how it considers the institutions of the traditional social organization.

In addition to Fox's alumni, other Australian anthropologists have conducted research on the country. One of these is Susanna Barnes, who is now at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada. In the research for her doctoral study (*Customary Renewal and the Pursuit of Power and Prosperity in Post-Occupation East Timor: A Case-Study from Babulo, Uato-Lari*, 2017), she analyzes how what has been dubbed the "resurgence of tradition" in independent Timor-Leste can be defined as the way that the people shape and give meaning to their social interactions, drawing on some key features of their modes of existence such as "the flow of life" principle or the logic of precedence.

Lisa Palmer, a human geographer herself, has also made interesting contributions to the social and anthropological understanding of the country. In her works, she has analyzed human-environment relationships (especially with water) in the postcolonial context and has explored a range of encounters (case studies) with people related to Timor from her personal life. In doing so she has explored central elements of Timorese society and culture: the social institution of houses, the concept of *lulik* (taboo), etc.<sup>2</sup> Chris Shepherd, during his time at ANU, analyzed the process of rural development and environmental conservation in Timor from a historical perspective.<sup>3</sup> More recently, he has explored animism transformations through case studies of encounters with external actors (colonial and church ethnographers, naturalists, anthropologists).<sup>4</sup>

The beginnings of professional anthropological research in what is today Timor-Leste started during the last years of Portuguese colonial rule and came to a halt during the Indonesian occupation (1975-1999), when anthropological studies were mostly carried out under the close supervision of the Indonesian state itself. After the restoration of independence and the return of sovereignty, the first new nation of the 21st century witnessed the arrival of many anthropologists from different parts of the world eager to conduct fieldwork in a country that had been closed to foreign researchers for 24 years. In this piece, I provide an overview of the anthropological literature in Timor-Leste since the recovery of its sovereignty (2002) until the present day. My intention here is not to carry out a critical evaluation of the literature corpus of works done during this period, but rather to present a quick snapshot of the scholarly anthropological work that the country has witnessed.

Sara Niner has focused on analyses of the role of women in Timorese history, as well as their present role in the economy and politics. In addition, she has also investigated and has a strong focus on the relevance that Timorese women have in social, cultural, economic, and political aspects of the country.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to those mentioned here in more detail, it is also worth acknowledging the work carried out by other Australian-based academics such as Annette Marie Field (*Places of Suffering and Pathways to Healing: Post-Conflict Life in Bidau, East Timor*, PhD diss., James Cook University, 2004) and Pyone Myat Thu (*Negotiating Displacement: A Study of Land and Livelihoods in Rural East Timor*, PhD diss., ANU, 2012).

### Brazilian anthropology

In Brazil we found a group of researchers led by two professors who conducted fieldwork for their doctoral dissertations in the early 2000s and have remained engaged in Timor-Leste's scholarship

ever since: Kelly Silva with a 2004 thesis entitled (*Paradoxos da autodeterminação: a construção do Estado-Nação e práticas da ONU em Timor-Leste and Daniel Simião's As donas da palavra. Gênero, justiça e a invenção da violência doméstica em Timor-Leste*, 2005). Currently they both serve as professors at the University of Brasília. They have researched a range of topics on the formation of the nation-state of Timor-Leste and their articulation and relationship with other realities in the country, including analyzing the processes of social change brought about by the introduction of modernization paradigms. More recently, they have focused on the analysis of economic paradigm shifts at the local and national level.

Silva leads the Economic and Globalization Studies Laboratory (LEEG). Under her supervision, three doctoral theses have been defended in recent years: that of Carlos Andrés Oviedo Ospina, *De quem é a terra?* *Práticas de governo e construções de Estado em Timor-Leste. Etnografia do levantamento cadastral no município de Ermera*, where he studies the cadastral survey procedures carried out by the state as an element of the modernization process that has caused the reification of the land; that of Renata Nogueira da Silva, *Tanbasá sa'e foho? Reprodução e transformação da vida social das casas sagradas no Timor-Leste pós-colonial*, about the patrimonialization processes of the country's *lulik* (sacred) houses and the way in which these institutions are experienced by the Timorese; and, finally, that of Alexandre Jorge de Medeiros Fernández, *Nação florindo nas casas: A produção de parentes e nacionais num ambiente camponês em Timor-Leste*, where he analyzes how the material environmental conditions of a region of the country (Oecussi) have contributed to the processes of subjectivation through which people identify themselves as members (relatives) from a house (descent group) and as Timorese nationals. For his part, Daniel S. Simião began an interesting work of visual anthropology from the Laboratory of Social Interactions' Images and Records (IRIS) that has crystallized at present into a couple of ethnographic films (*Sé mak sala tenkeser selu sala*, 2011 & *Pás ho dame*, 2009).

In addition to the research carried out at the University of Brasília, it is worth noting the research of Alessandro Boarcccaech, who defended his doctoral thesis at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul in 2011 and is currently working at the National

Fig. 1: People dancing during the inauguration of a sacred house in Maubara. (Photo by the author, 2011).





University Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL). His thesis, later published as a book (*A diferença entre os Iguais. São Paulo: Porto de Idéias*, 2013), presents an ethnography resulting from his fieldwork among the *humangili* population of Atauro island, focusing on religious phenomena and exploring the relationships between Catholics and local belief systems (i.e., ancestral cults and animism).

### Portuguese anthropology

Portuguese anthropologists have also left their mark on Timor-Leste. One of them is Lucio Sousa, from the Universidade Aberta (UAb), who carried out his doctoral thesis (*An tia: Partilha ritual e organização social entre os bunak de Lamak Hitu, Bobonaro, Timor-Leste*, 2010) on the way in which some Búnak populations have reconstructed their social organization and their ritual practices in a context of sociopolitical change in a post-conflict situation.

Paulo Castro Seixas, first at Fernando Pessoa University and subsequently at the University of Lisbon, has researched urban post-colonial Dili in the context of transition. He has also examined the international relations of the country both with Portugal and, more recently, as a member of ASEAN.<sup>6</sup> From the University of Lisbon as well, there is Susana de Matos Viegas,<sup>7</sup> who has been conducting research in Timor-Leste among Fataluku language-speaking communities since 2012.

Other interesting work is carried out by the historian and anthropologist Ricardo Roque, who has worked on the history of colonial anthropology of Portuguese Timor and colonial mimesis – as a technology of power – of the colonial administration.<sup>8</sup>

Some other works that are worth mentioning are those written by the Dutch-Portuguese Maria Johanna Schouten and by Frederico Delgado Rosa. Although Schouten's main area of research has been Indonesia's Minahasa region, she has also produced an interesting body of work on history and anthropology, analyzing the historical partition of the island, researching the Portuguese colonial presence, and archiving anthropological studies of the country. Rosa, for his part, has mainly put his focus on the anthropological analysis of the ethnographies written by the Catholic missionaries during Portuguese colonial rule. Finally, we should mention Helena Borges, who in her doctoral thesis (*Crenças, atitudes e práticas de saúde reprodutiva em Timor-Leste: Uma abordagem intercultural, Universidade Aberta*, 2012) carried out a comparative study on beliefs, attitudes, and practices on reproductive health in ten of the 13 Timorese districts (now municipalities).

### Timorese works of anthropological interest

Regarding the contributions made by Timorese researchers, we do not find the works of many professional anthropologists during this period. Although there were a few professionally trained Timorese anthropologists during the 1990s, most of them did not publish any academic works after 2002. This is the case for Father Apolinário Maria Apparicio Guterres, Father Filomeno Simão Jacob Abel, and Justino Maria Aparicio Guterres. All of them hold public positions in the service of either the state or the Church.

The only professionally trained anthropologist that published works after independence was a student of Fox, Dionísio Babo-Soares. His anthropological contributions came to a halt after he became an active member of the National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (Portuguese: Congresso Nacional de Reconstrução de Timor, CNRT), a political party in which he served as Minister for the V, VI, and VIII Constitutional Governments.

In addition to the contributions made by Babo-Soares, those of Benjamin de Araújo e Côrte-Real, a sociolinguist analyzing themes of mambai oral literature, stand out. Also, some other important works were produced by Vicente Paulino, on communication and culture; Josh Trindade, on the hybridization

of the social organization of the state and traditional society and the notion of the *lulik* as the core of Timorese cultural values; Irta de Araújo, about the sacred aspects of Timorese midwives; and Valente de Araújo, on oral narratives and rituals of production.

### Other countries

From the United States, the most interesting works in recent years have been those written by Laura Yoder, Prash Naidu, and Gabriel Tusinski. Yoder did her doctoral thesis (*Custom, Codification, Collaboration: Integrating the Legacies of Land and Forest Authorities in Oecusse Enclave, East Timor*, 2003) at Yale University on the forms of land management used by local institutions during the different political regimes through which the country has passed. Naidu, who works at Arcadia University, completed his thesis (*Sea-Change: Mambai Sensory Practices and Hydrocarbon Exploitation in Timor-Leste*, 2019) at the University of Michigan on the ways in which Mambai-language speakers in the Southwest perceive and make sense of socio-ecological changes in their living environment. For his part, Gabriel Tusinski (now at Singapore University of Technology and Design), analyzes in his thesis *The Spectral City: Cultural Belonging, Urban Space, and Post-Conflict Reconstruction in Dili, Timor-Leste* (University of Chicago, 2015) how post-conflict urban architectural reconstruction projects and nation-building discourses revitalize indigenous Timorese sensibilities about kinship based on the idea of going home while. At the same time, Tusinski shows that Timorese frame these kinship practices as incompatible with democratic ideals. It is also worth mentioning the work undertaken by another one of James Fox's students, Andrea K. Molnar, at Northern Illinois University before her retirement. She conducted fieldwork among the Kémak-speaking people of Atsabe (Ermera) during the early 2000s and published several articles on political conflict and identity, as well as a book that provides an overview of the country's politics, history, and culture.<sup>9</sup>

From the United Kingdom, another anthropologist who has been doing interesting work is Judith Bovensiepen. A German national herself, she received her doctorate from the London School of Economics and Political Science in 2010 and became professor at the University of Kent afterwards. She has worked on topics such as the stranger-king theory, precedence, binary oppositions, house societies, and the socioeconomic prospects of the country.<sup>10</sup> Also, under her supervision, Laura Bourke has recently defended her doctoral dissertation, *Reproducing Life After Conflict: Population, Prosperity, and Potent Landscapes in Timor-Leste* (2022), in which she explores the approaches and understandings that different agents (state, church, local communities, etc.) have towards reproduction in a post-conflict scenario.

Another scholar who did some research at the beginning of the 2000s was Alexander Loch, a German national who wrote his doctoral dissertation (later published in book form in 2007's *Haus, Handy & Halleluja. Psychosoziale Rekonstruktion in Osttimor*) on post-conflict dynamics in the country from a psychosocial reconstruction perspective. Also in Germany, Tanja Hohe did her doctoral research at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in 2004 (*Clash of Paradigms in East Timor. Introducing Anthropology into State-Building*), where she analyzed Timor-Leste's state-building process as a clash of paradigms between United Nations peacekeepers and those of the local populations.

In Denmark, at Aarhus University, Maj Nygaard-Christensen carried out her doctoral research on humanitarian interventions, democratization processes, and political imaginaries (*When Utopia Fails: Political Dreams and Imaginaries of Democracy in Timor-Leste*, Aarhus Universitet, 2010). Together with Angie Bexley, she also edited a volume on fieldwork in the country.<sup>11</sup> Another Danish National, Henri Myrntinen, did his 2010 doctoral

dissertation (*Histories of Violence, States of Denial - Militias, Martial Arts and Masculinity in Timor-Leste*) at the University of Kwazulu-Natal (South Africa) on the relationship between the construction of male gender identity and urban violence among young Timorese.

In France, there is the 2018 doctoral thesis defended at the National Museum of Natural History in Paris by the cultural geographer Bruna Crespi (*Sacralité, rituels et développement chez les bunak et tetun de la région de Suai, Timor Oriental*). In her thesis, Crespi analyzes the development of megaprojects in South Timor-Leste and the ways in which they affect local notions of territoriality.

In Spain, anthropological fieldwork in the country was carried out by a team from the University of A Coruña between 2006 and 2013. I did my own PhD dissertation (*Dinámicas políticas y económicas en el dominio ritual y la vida cotidiana en Timor Oriental. Estudios de caso desde la aldea de Faulara*) there, analyzing the role of rituals in rural society and exploring the transformations within the ritual domain which resulted from the processes of drastic change in the political, economic, social, and cultural spheres.

### Final remarks

In the first years of independence, anthropological exploration was closely linked to the need to enact specific policies for the construction and development of the country. At that time, a good part of the studies that were carried out within academia also focused their attention on the national reconstruction process. In this regard, the role of the United Nations in the construction of the Timorese nation-state has been extensively analyzed by authors such as Kelly Silva and Tanja Hohe. Likewise, research was carried out on the psychosocial reconstruction of a population that, after decades of suffering and struggle, was facing a new, more peaceful scenario. The relations between the state, local institutions, local forms of governance and existence can be found in research on the hybridization of the state-traditional society, justice, natural resource management, access to and ownership of land, and the local culture. Thus, we find that the initial explosion of works has focused enough on the analysis of social problems as well as on political anthropological themes with an applied perspective.

After the end of the United Nations missions, anthropological research has somewhat lost its strong applied orientation and has focused on other classical topics closer to academic anthropology: home societies, cultural values, identity, social hierarchies and precedence, modes of existence, society-state relations, and so on. Even while dealing with classical anthropological issues, the interest in analyzing the social problems of the country has been maintained.

Among all these issues, it is probably that of economic life that has received the most attention in recent years. Andrew McWilliam had already studied how economic security at the domestic and local level may be the underlying reason for the cultural revitalization of traditions in the country. He has stated that ritual exchanges experienced in the country could be seen as a palliative mechanism that was used to redistribute resources when Timor-Leste temporarily left the world market economy after its independence.<sup>12</sup> In my thesis, I also explore the issue of the regime of ritual exchanges, insofar as they convey the goods and means of production of local economies, suggesting that they would function as an informal economic social security network. Bovensiepen, on the other hand,<sup>13</sup> has been concerned about the country's visions of the future, especially with regard to economic infrastructure and oil exploitation macro-projects. More recently, Kelly Silva, Lisa Palmer, and Teresa Cunha have edited a volume specifically dedicated to analyzing how different relationships pertaining to supply, production, distribution, and consumption mechanisms are the result

of the plurality of the modes of existence of the daily life of the Timorese.<sup>14</sup>

As a negative element, it should be noted that only a small number of Timorese nationals have done anthropological research. Most Timorese professional anthropologists have held positions of responsibility that have kept them away from scientific research. This, added to the fact that there is no academic institution specifically dedicated to anthropological research or teaching in the country, has been one of the elements that has impeded social anthropology on Timor-Leste being carried out by its own citizens. Having national anthropologists analyzing their own country would certainly enrich the quality of the anthropological analysis of it.

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#### Notes

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