

***Conflict, Identity, and State Formation in East Timor 2000–2017*. By James Scambary. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2019. Hardcover: 252pp.**

Over the past few decades, the successes and failures of United Nations' (UN) peacebuilding missions have provided grist for the scholarly mill. The case of Timor-Leste—which has seen attacks on UN staff, strongmen, militia, witchcraft, spying, ninjas, police and rivalries within the army—is indeed a captivating story and a fascinating topic for scholarly studies about peacebuilding and state formation in post-conflict societies.

While there have been many studies on the machinations of high politics and different aspects of rural communities in Timor-Leste, few studies have looked into the subnational conflicts across urban and rural areas that characterize daily life in the country. James Scambary's book, *Conflict, Identity, and State Formation in East Timor 2000–2017*, admirably tackles this middle ground, and adds a welcome critical view to the existing literature on the conflicts in Timor-Leste. His study, based on extensive fieldwork, demonstrates how violent gang and social conflicts do not follow “master narratives” of divisions between the police and the military, strongmen tussles or youth disaffection, but are rather multi-scalar and diachronic. Most instructive is the section “The UN Made Me Do It” (p. 7), which lays out the dominant “critical” narratives of peacebuilding and statebuilding which has depicted the UN as an incompetent straw man, whose hubris and mistakes exacerbated conflicts and violence. Scambary convincingly argues that synchronic and variable-driven accounts focused on UN failures are incomplete. Instead, the book describes a complex continuum of violence, historicizing the various violent groups and their place in Timorese state formation. These various conflicts, spilling from within families and local communities into national politics and international NGOs, often took place outside the scope of the UN mission.

The book is based on Scambary's deep involvement and long experience in Dili, as well as his knowledge of the indigenous language Tetun. One telling part of Scambary's narrative describes how he got access to local sources for insights that informed his research and allowed him to question the “commonsense” readings of violence, the state and civil society: “People who were affluent, educated, law-abiding citizens were often connected by marriage or blood to notorious figures involved in crime or violence. [...]

once I realized this, such knowledge became key to my research as often NGO workers, civil servants, and in one case a tennis coach, were able to connect me with some of the figures involved in the 2006–2007 crisis” (p. 16).

Structurally, two-thirds of the book examine different sets of subnational actors. Each chapter begins with a synopsis, contextualizing the opening vignettes. Chapter One explains how the book draws on the Murdoch School of Political Economy, which applies critical approaches to the study of Asian states. Chapter Two provides a short history of Timor-Leste. Using a political economy approach, it provides an overview of the patterns of capital accumulation, the historical background of rulers and the ruled, the role of Indonesia in the development of nationalism, the importance of sports, gangs and militias, and the still salient links to Indonesia’s capital, Jakarta, and Kupang in West Timor.

Chapter Three lays out Scambary’s critique of accounts of the 2006–7 crisis as a blip caused by spoilers, or the UN, or youth migration and unemployment. Rather, Scambary points to the demographic fracturing of Dili into discrete groups with strong links to rural areas. Such rural-urban linkages mirrored how national-level politicians (and the middle class) were linked to their rural base through kinship and other informal networks. The rest of the book turns on the central dynamics of the 2006–7 crisis.

Chapters Four, Five and Six offer accounts of the various forms of martial arts groups, gangs, ritual groups and other violent groups that can be found in Timor-Leste. These chapters contain useful typologies, allowing the non-expert to see how a landscape of (violent) social groups exist. The types outlined here include veterans’ groups with explicit links to political parties and paramilitaries with links to the police and the military. These sections are incredibly detailed, reflecting painstaking and careful ethnography.

The final three chapters “jump scale” as they assess the implications of the social foundations of violence on national politics. Chapter Seven offers a wry take on peacebuilding and mediation capacity building, while Chapter Eight offers a sound, empirical critique of clientelism, corruption and patronage in Timor-Leste since 2007. Drawing incisively on UN and NGO reports, Scambary shows the links between street-level gang politics and the contemporary Timorese state.

Given how violence in Timor-Leste has been the subject of much feminist scholarship, this analytical approach could have been better integrated into Scambary’s account of subnational violence. For

instance, while key feminist concepts such as “family” or “kinship” are frequently cited as the starting point for violence, such terms are only cursorily explained in the text.

The book provides rich empirical material for scholars and students keen to learn more about violent gangs and martial arts groups, with wide scope for further comparison with cognate groups in Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and the Philippines. The composite and detailed nature of the book might make it a bit difficult for non-specialist readers to follow. However, the sheer weight of empirical material is lightened through comparisons with other cases such as Papua New Guinea and Rwanda, and the inclusion of large numbers of photographs, diagrams and tables. For specialists of Timor-Leste, the detail and depth of knowledge of the twists and turns of the country’s murky politics will be fascinating. Moreover, as Scambray notes in the final chapters on clientelism and state formation, Asia provides important lessons for scholars of Timorese politics.

As a contribution to critical studies of war and conflict, including cultural approaches to peacebuilding, Scambray’s account provides further evidence that domestic and subnational politics and violence matter, even in cases where the international community is heavily involved.

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