

***Three Centuries of Conflict in East Timor.* By Douglas Kammen.  
Singapore: NUS Press, 2015. Softcover: 231pp.**

*Three Centuries of Conflict in East Timor* examines the pattern of recurring violence in the district of Maubara in Timor-Leste. Dissatisfied with conventional macro-level analytical approaches, Douglas Kammen employs a microhistorical analysis of the interactions among local stakeholders and their relationship with external actors. Kammen emphasizes that “a microhistorical approach to the violence in a single locality serves to foreground how local history and meaning informed and were transformed by the violence as local and national actors responded over the ensuing years to independence, reconstruction, and the new realities facing post-independence Timor-Leste” (p. 144). The book takes two murder cases in Maubara — in 1975 and in 1999 — as points of departure for the investigation, which goes back to the eighteenth century and debunks a myth about the contested origins of ruling families there.

Kammen demonstrates that “local patterns of alliance and rivalry have remained remarkably constant across time and continue to exert strong influences on the positions that individuals, extended families, and entire hamlets adopt” (p. 19). The author’s assessment of this narrow investigation carries a broader implication to the existing knowledge about the pattern of recurring violence. That is, violence will recur as a result of a synthesis between unsettled grievances and opportunities for revenge. As illustrated in the book, unsettled grievances are the product of a complex interaction of various factors, including both historical and current animosities involving (inter)personal, (inter)family, (inter)clan, (inter)tribal and (inter)communal issues. Opportunities for revenge emerge when underlying local motives can be covered or sanctioned by a supralocal cause. Under such circumstances, revenge seeking criminal behaviours can be legitimized in the name of liberation, resistance or justice. The observation of recurring violence in Maubara illustrates a fundamental rule of violence in human society, i.e., “local solidarities and rivalries mapped on to supralocal dynamics, which in turn intensified and magnified local differences” (p. 170).

One of the two individuals that the author focuses on, Mau Kuru, was killed in 1999 in the course of intensifying violence between those who wanted independence for East Timor and those wished to remain part of Indonesia. Seen through the prism of a national narrative, many foreign observers would be satisfied with

the plausible explanation that focuses on the adversarial relationship between the victims and the perpetrators, and their divergent political affiliations and stance on independence. However, while many were killed indiscriminately simply because they supported independence, for the murder of Mau Kuru it seems that additional explanations are required. The book successfully sheds light on the auxiliary factors by introducing “long-standing local narratives, allegiances, and rivalries” (p. 170) as alternative prisms.

A snapshot understanding of the local reality prevents us from appreciating a tangled web of local dynamics. Legalistic approaches, which would frame the reality in a dichotomy between individuals (e.g., the victim versus the perpetrator) for a particular case in a limited time period (e.g., mass violence in 1999), blind us to a myriad of stakeholders involved in historical allegiances and rivalries, which would seem irrelevant to a contested case from the viewpoint of judicial proceedings. At the same time, social science labels such as “politically motivated killings” obscure the need for a more nuanced understanding of each case. Likewise, “the abstraction ‘community’ obfuscated the deep divisions resulting from the long history of violence, resistance, and ambitions in the present” (p. 166). Outside observers tend to lose sight of individual accounts such as attributes, motives, drivers and causes and the interplay between them, a better understanding of which is essential for facilitating conflict resolution and reconciliation.

The author was critical of the transitional justice practices initiated by outside actors such as the United Nations (UN) for not paying sufficient attention to long-standing local narratives. If an aim of reconciliation is to terminate a vicious cycle of retaliatory violence, any measures for reconciliation must be grounded on the reality being informed by a microhistorical analysis of the local dynamics. On the one hand, the UN-led effort towards reconciliation was aimed at addressing only the immediate past i.e. the mass violence of 1999. On the other, the reliance on traditional conflict resolution mechanisms also ran the risk of confronting inherent dilemmas. Partly because of the legacy of the past, “traditional conflict resolution mechanisms ... could result in local friction over who were the appropriate bearers of those traditions and what the traditions entailed” (p. 17).

The author claims that “While macro-level approaches to Timorese history have tended to treat the indigenous polities as unitary actors, Maubara’s history suggests the need to pay far greater attention to how and under what conditions internal divisions and

rivalries produced variation in responses to supralocal actors, ideas, and events” (p. 60). His argument is well taken, and a microhistorical analysis of a particular locality can help us understand the local dynamics and their continuity. The question is how to appreciate the interplay between long-standing local rivalries and present-day supralocal cleavages. It is uncertain when historical divisions become salient in the contemporary discourse as the colonial rule has undermined the legitimacy of traditional rule. Two contradicting phenomena were presented: “the fear generated by the 2006 crisis largely overrode historical allegiances and even inter-suco rivalries” (p. 162), while the “2012 elections in Maubara revealed the continued dominance of national politics and the renewed influence of traditional local elites and their rivalries” (p. 163). It is reasonable to conclude that historical allegiances and rivalries are mobilized selectively and expediently by local stakeholders to enhance their position in the current power struggle.

As the book examines the pattern of recurring violence in Maubara, it paints a picture of Maubara as a conflict-prone society. However, it fails to offer a microhistorical analysis of the local narratives about “peaceful” coexistence. So while the book successfully reveals the significance of a microhistorical understanding of local dynamics, the next step is to explore how and under what conditions local dynamics would serve to instigate violent behaviour, and more importantly, how the narratives of “peaceful” coexistence can override the pattern of recurring violence.

---

YUJI UESUGI is Professor in the Faculty of International Research and Education, Waseda University. Postal address: 1-6-1 Nishi-Waseda, Shinjuku, Tokyo, 169-8050 Japan; email: uesugi@waseda.jp.