

***Fieldwork in Timor-Leste: Understanding Social Change through Practice.* Edited by Maj Nygaard-Christensen and Angie Bexley. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2017. Hardcover: 261pp.**

Maj Nygaard-Christensen and Angie Bexley's edited collection, *Fieldwork in Timor-Leste: Understanding Social Change through Practice*, draws together contributions from a number of researchers engaged with processes of social, cultural and political change in Timor-Leste. The contributors each reflect upon personal experiences of conducting anthropological, historical and archival fieldwork in Timor-Leste, and position these reflections within the context of ethnographic praxis more broadly. In doing so, the volume seeks to challenge essentialist notions of what constitutes East Timorese national identity and how it has been produced, as well as to unpack the critical processes of “sense-making” in which researchers are engaged (p. 15). By examining the intricacies of social and political change in Timor-Leste, the experiences of individuals and communities within these processes, and the relationship between internal and external imaginaries that reinforce and contest concepts of nationhood, this volume provides a sensitive, contemplative and valuable contribution to the field of Timor-Leste studies.

The editors position the volume within the context of previous approaches to research on Timor-Leste, and present a solid overview of this literature. Notably, they observe the dominant paradigms and representative modes within each approach, for example: the prevalence of analyses of social organization within the context of cultural studies; the narratives of resistance and national identity that dominate histories of the Indonesian occupation; and the impact of foreign intervention on the contemporary nation of Timor-Leste. There is a strong sense of how various disciplinary approaches, research methods, notions of the political, and temporality can shape the possibilities for “writing” Timor-Leste.

The volume is organized into several thematic sections: Portuguese Timor; Fieldwork in a New Nation; Spatiality and Temporality; Post-Conflict Fieldwork; and Positionality — although these distinctions are not strictly observed, and the chapters engage with these themes to various degrees throughout. The first section provides personal accounts of conducting research on colonial Timor-Leste. David Hicks reflects upon his experience of conducting fieldwork

in Viqueque during the Portuguese colonial period and after independence, while Ricardo Roque frames his journey through Portuguese colonial archives as a search for “missing archival traces” (p. 65). These chapters make important observations about the research process, including issues associated with identity in the field, of serendipitous discovery, and the need for flexibility as a researcher.

In the remaining sections, the contributors draw upon experiences of and findings from fieldwork in independent Timor-Leste. They critically acknowledge the impact that the shift to independence has had upon access to the territory for foreign researchers, but also observe that Timor-Leste’s history of colonialism and occupation continues to shape the potential for writing about the country today. Some chapters are primarily concerned with communicating research findings that destabilize the historical and territorial categories that have shaped articulations of the East Timorese world: between the past and the present, between colonizer and colonized, and between violence and agency. Douglas Kammen, for example, examines the historical formation of the *suco* (village-level administrative unit) under Portuguese colonial rule to challenge conceptions of this unit as associated with bounded polities. Similarly, in exploring some of the complex entanglements of kinship ties and political affiliations within the subdistrict of Laclubar, Judith Bovensiepen problematizes the distinction between independence and integration that has featured within nationalist renderings of Timor-Leste’s history. Her approach demonstrates how attention to locally-grounded stories can provide more nuanced understandings of Timor-Leste’s past (and present).

The contributors, to varying degrees, intersperse their analyses with observations and reflections about fieldwork process, practice, experience and challenges. In reflecting upon his research on Fataluku cultural resilience and forest livelihoods, Andrew McWilliam highlights the importance of opportunity and spontaneity within the fieldwork process. In explaining her decision to focus on how young East Timorese have attempted to create a “cultural citizenship” to forge belonging and legitimacy in the new nation-state, Angie Bexley notes her experience studying in Indonesia, her positioning as a scholar of Indonesian studies, and her active role in sharing her sources with young East Timorese (p. 100). The notion of citizenship is raised again in the penultimate chapter, in which Guteriano Neves reflects upon his experiences of researching public

policy. Neves writes that for him, research is practised as a form of “active and engaged citizenship” (p. 222).

Questions of subject position and difference are addressed by most of the contributors, but the final section focuses explicitly on how positionality impacts research. For Neves, it is his identity as an East Timorese scholar leading him to research his own country that places him in a unique position. Amy Rothschild narrates her direct experience with controversies over approaches to East Timorese history among *malae* (foreigners) who are working and researching in the country. The complex role and positioning of the international community within Timor-Leste is similarly addressed by Maj Nygaard-Christensen in her discussion of a UN document that was leaked to the press in 2011. Using this example as a case in point, Nygaard-Christensen importantly draws attention to the “complex entanglements” between local and international political agendas in Timor-Leste, specifically in terms of the production and experience of conflict (p. 191).

Indeed, historical and contemporary conflict is a recurrent theme throughout the collection. The contributors grapple with how to understand past violence, as well as to interpret its impact upon contemporary social and political relations. For Pyone Myat Thu, the ramifications of these fractures within the East Timorese body politic are not only the subject of her research — specifically the issue of land contestation — but are experienced by the researcher firsthand. Witnessing the heated nature of disputations and experiencing personal displacement challenged Myat Thu to reflect upon some of the violent realities of doing ethnographic research in a post-conflict setting.

The contributors engage with various fieldwork practices, yet they share a critical focus on the relationship between everyday practice and discourse. The volume stresses the contested, constructed and complex nature of national identity, as well as the various ways in which individuals and communities engage with and practise forms of citizenship and belonging. In its attention to locally-grounded practices, processes and experiences of nationhood, the volume provides a valuable addition to the field of Timor-Leste studies. Beyond the immediate field, however, the volume also contributes to theoretical and political discussions around central issues within ethnographic research, such as spatiality, temporality, positionality and difference. The volume would be most valuable to those engaged in academic, policy or

development work in Timor-Leste. Yet the insights and reflections contained within this volume would also be of interest to researchers adopting anthropological and historical research methods; in particular, the construction and contestation of national identity in places that have experienced deeply divisive and protracted conflict, and self-reflexive and critical attempts to understand the processes of social and political change.

HANNAH LONEY is Lecturer in Politics at the Australian Catholic University, Melbourne. Postal address: Locked Bag 4115 DC, Fitzroy, VIC 3065, Australia; email: hannah.loney@acu.edu.au.