

# Afterword: A study in contrasts

Andrew McWilliam

I thank Judith Bovensiepen for her invitation to present a closing reflection to this new collection of critical perspectives on contemporary developments in Timor-Leste – now 16 years beyond the historic celebrations of independence in 2002. Today, with the turbulent early years of government seemingly settled in a unity of political purpose and bounteous oil revenues fuelling an ambitious infrastructure program, it is timely to reflect on the impact and implications of these initiatives for the future prosperity of the nation.

In her introduction to the volume, Judith highlights the widespread importance of hope in Timor-Leste society as an underlying and productive commitment to the future and a force for future wellbeing. The resilience of hope and its powerful capacity to sustain life under conditions of hardship was no more eloquently displayed than in the drawn-out Timorese struggle for independence that ultimately prevailed against all odds and ushered in an unprecedented opportunity for societal renewal. For really the first time in the modern history of the region, the people of Timor-Leste found themselves in a position to determine their own future(s) and on their own terms. The unprecedented baby boom that accompanied independence was a peacetime dividend that served to reinforce, in dramatic terms, a fervent belief in the benefits to come.

Nearly two decades later, Timor-Leste citizens remain enthusiastically engaged with processes of post-conflict recovery and the broader challenges of nation-building, but any notion of a collective vision of the future is much more fragmented and widely contested. In the diversely democratic, post-independence landscape of contemporary Timor-Leste, visions of the future among Timorese households reflect a shifting array

of personal and shared aspirations directed to sometimes very different material ends, with all working purposefully to shape their own versions of a post-conflict future and better quality of life.

The present volume offers an extended commentary on the range and limits of these visions for the nation in the making. It considers the extent to which the hard-won hopes of independence may yet be fulfilled under the prevailing economic and social trajectories. Given the weight of expectations attaching to these optimistic prospects, the likelihood is that many will be disappointed, and even resentful, when the much-desired and often-promised fruits of independence fail to materialise.

Certainly, there is a persistent scepticism voiced by many observers about the likelihood of success under the current approach to fast-tracked oil resource-based development transformations. Indeed, the failure of exaggerated development claims to fulfil their promise is in many respects a recurrent historical pattern in Timor-Leste. Douglas Kammen's opening chapter reviewing the experiences of former governing regimes of the territory underlines this point. The Portuguese colonial regime's persistently thwarted plans and projects for advancement in order to establish the colony as a financially viable possession is a salutary lesson. So too is Kammen's critique of the failure of occupying Indonesia to integrate the former colony into a shared territorial unity, and the well-intentioned if misguided regulatory stewardship of successive interim United Nations programs. His examples highlight the risks and pitfalls of trying to engineer prosperity from above in Timor-Leste.

One striking difference, which may make all the difference, is that now the question of who will guide the imaginative future of Timor-Leste devolves to the Timorese themselves and their own elected representatives, rather than those governing on behalf of external powers, however well-intentioned. Timorese resentments over critical commentaries casting doubt on their chances of contemporary success lead to comparisons with the independence struggle and the demonstrated Timorese capacity to prevail against unlikely odds. It is also perhaps not surprising that the terms on which these debates and differences are conceptualised and prosecuted find expression in distinctive cultural and symbolic ways. Two recurring and overlapping thematic distinctions are particularly prominent and inform many of the contributing perspectives in the volume. The distinctions reflect the contrast between (1) regulatory power and ritual authority, and (2) a related distinction around the luminous

qualities of lightness and darkness applied to specific knowledge domains and morally inflected fields of action. Both are semantically rich cultural fields with complex symbolic associations and inferences that apply across Timor-Leste. In multiple ways, they are contemporary iterations of what anthropologist James Fox (1980: 333) has previously described in terms of dynamic shared categories of social reproduction expressed as ‘metaphors for living encoded in pervasive binary form’.

## Regulatory power and ritual authority

One of the sharpest distinctions drawn in the volume is that between the ambitious state-based (*estado*) visions of development (*dezenvolvementu*), underwritten by the still-bounteous revenues from offshore oil resources; versus the quieter, albeit insistent, revivalist practices based around Timorese custom and tradition (*lisan/adat*). The latter in so many ways continues to underpin household and intergenerational wellbeing across the country – the ‘good life’ (*tempo rai-diak*), as Trindade and Barnes refer to it. Thematically, this distinction expresses a dynamic tension between the regulatory power of the state and the ritual authority of custom. In the contemporary context of Timor-Leste, this can also be seen as a tension between oil and ancestors; between a futuristic imaginary of hyper-modernity versus another more grounded agenda that derives persuasive force from the vital engagement with the agency of ancestors in the present. The tension is variously and insightfully addressed by many of the contributing authors, who demonstrate with a restrained critical appreciation that these two orientations are for the most part divergent fields where much of the population is actively excluded and marginalised in the implementation of government development projects, despite much rhetoric and speechmaking to the contrary. The phrase, ‘Development whether you like it or not’ (*Hakarak ka lakohi*) neatly encapsulates this relation (see Bovensiepen, Chapter 6).

Laura Meitzner Yoder’s critical appreciation of the Oecusse-based ZEESM (*Zonas Especiais de Economia Social de Mercado de Timor-Leste*, or Special Economic Zone of Social Market Economy of Timor-Leste) project also highlights this tension. The ZEESM vision is one that explicitly rejects the past as a source of inspiration and seeks to ‘supersede the present’ as something wholly new and transformational. Conversely, local Oecusse perspectives cherish the past as an idealised time. The ‘past informs the present (and future), providing a framework within which decisions are

made and life makes sense', Yoder writes. Her characterisation of the importance of the ancestral past and its relevance to present and future practice resonates strongly with chapters by Viegas, and Trindade and Barnes, where local understandings of the present and future possibilities are inevitably and intimately framed in precisely this way. The most senior Naueti elder of Daralari for example, tells Susana Barnes that 'we should govern ourselves, according to our own customs ... That is what we wanted then [1975] and what we want now'. In a similar fashion, Susana de Matos Viegas demonstrates how Fataluku ancestors are integral participants in events of the living and form part of the social collectivity that anticipates future wellbeing. These are not views that seek to reject or supersede the past. On the contrary, they find strength and comfort in its customary embrace and continuing authority.

The growing weight of criticism voiced against what are seen as policy excesses and the heavy financial commitment by government to Timor-Leste megaprojects highlights the emerging division between active participation in the policy process and its commensurate rewards, and those who remain passive onlookers or marginal participants in the whole endeavour. Lavish expenditure and preferential tendering enriches the institutions of state power, business elites and coterie of politically connected clients (Roll, Chapter 7; and Neves, Chapter 3), while disenfranchising the poor and politically marginal. The new reality confirms Douglas Kammen's perceptive point, at least in the context of the various megaprojects, that 'one cannot help but notice that Timorese [people] are almost entirely absent'. These are 'plans without people' and, on the face of it, exemplary models of exactly the high modernist, technical schemes characterised by James Scott (1998) in his critique of the state and its various schemes that prove to be disastrous failures for its citizens.

## On the lightness and darkness of being

A second recurring distinction expressed by many of the authors in the volume is the metaphorical contrast between light and dark. Judith Bovensiepen introduces the volume with this distinction, referencing the enthusiastic description of the Tasi Mane infrastructure project by the subdistrict administrator of Betano, who thought these efforts would lead Timor-Leste 'out of darkness and into light'. The allusion references a frequently expressed characterisation of the future in Timor-Leste and

one with a long pedigree. Closely tied to allied notions of progress and liberation from ignorance and dogma of the past, it offers a vision of the world that is open to transformation from within (Cascardi 1992: 6). In this respect, the popular sense of progress into the light from darkness arguably has its conceptual origins in the European enlightenment and the self-justifying imperative to spread the assimilationist, civilising mission of western society to far-flung, benighted, colonial dependencies such as Portuguese Timor.

Here the notion of progress and advancement, from darkness into light, is also intimately associated with Catholicism and a relinquishing of the perceived fetishised superstitions of tradition.<sup>1</sup> In Portuguese Timor, the 'civilised' indigenous Timorese (*çivilizados*) denoted individuals who were regarded as culturally modern, which in practice referred to the privileged, urban-dwelling Timorese who had converted to Catholicism; those who had 'seen the shining light' of God's love and teachings as they abandoned the 'morally compromised', traditional customs (*usos e costumes*) of ancestor worship and blood sacrifice. As Webb Keane puts it, 'People first experienced what they understood to be modernity as having a Christian face. Conceptually the idea of modernity seems to have been shaped in a dialectical relationship to a moral understanding of progress and agency' (2007: 47).

In practice, and despite the avowed objectives of the Portuguese civilising mission, the ability of indigenous Timorese (by definition, *nao-çivilizado*) to achieve the status of *çivilizado* (or *assimilado*) was heavily circumscribed and, for most people, unattainable. According to a 1950s source, for example, just 1.8 per cent of the population of Portuguese Timor had managed to achieve this privileged status, but the category included the Portuguese themselves and other non-indigenous populations. It meant that nearly 98 per cent of indigenous Timorese remained outside the enlightened status of the progressive and desirable urban and Catholic modernity (Weatherbee 1966). Today the force of these earlier racial distinctions and discriminations have weakened significantly in the context of postcolonial independence but resonances between town (*cidade*) and country (*povu*), and between the (great) *maun bo'ot* and the (lowly) *ema ki'ik* undoubtedly persist.

---

1 Namely, 'the pagan's inappropriate ascription of agency to non-human subjects' (Keane 2007: 677).

Chris Shepherd in his analysis of certain development practices offers a play on the modernist vision of moving from darkness to light, through his critique of a technical assistance project distributing solar lights into Timorese rural communities. The mismatch between glowing reports of success of the program (known as Radiant Nights) and the rather different realities of practice echoes a broader anthropology of development critique on the failure of expectations of modernity. It also highlights what Shepherd argues is the complex shadow effect of interventions that so often reflect the desires and hopes of the providers of aid and technology rather than the presumed recipients.

Ironically, the cultural values and symbolism associated with darkness and light in terms of metaphorical expressions of indigenous Timorese values and beliefs are, in many ways, the reverse of the presumed trajectory of modernity. Lisa Palmer, in her chapter on the distinction that people of Baucau make between the bright/light world of the living and the dark, powerful world of the ancestors, references the dynamic, ascribed qualities of metallurgy, agency and the materiality of relationships between the living and the dead, and between human and non-human realms. Darkness in this cultural construction is a deeply valued source of authority, protection and blessing, one that provides meaning and direction to the world of the living through reciprocal obligation and sacrificial communication. This is not an orientation motivated by a desire to recreate the past in the present, but rather, as Trindade and Barnes say, people draw on the past to negotiate the future. In this sense, custom or tradition always operates as a contemporary response to the challenges of the present in order to anticipate a better future. In other words, it is the productive combination of darkness and light that ensures a prosperous future, not a rejection of the former in favour of the latter.

## Beyond the resource curse

The aspirational vision of the state championed in the *Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan 2011–2030* includes two especially ambitious objectives. First, it declares a goal for Timor-Leste to become an upper-income country with a healthy, well-educated population by 2030; and second, it seeks to secure the foundations of a sustainable and vibrant economy through the development of the petroleum sector. The latter objective is seen explicitly as a vital prerequisite for the broader goal and

a recognition that, for the near future at least, Timor-Leste's economic fortunes will rest on its capacity to further develop and build upon oil- and gas-based revenues to underwrite state budgets and investment. The present government is pursuing this development course and remains seemingly steadfast in its commitment to multimillion-dollar investments in infrastructure projects, like those of Tasi Mane and ZEESM, to fulfil their aspirational visions.

This approach is problematic, however, because it invites precisely the litany of economic and developmental problems generated by the now familiar and distorting effects of the resource curse. Authors in the present volume illustrate this aspect in compelling detail (see Neves, Almeida, Meitzner Yoder and Bovensiepen), and the result of a singular focus on oil and gas is that it leaves precious little space or consideration of alternative approaches to Timorese livelihood futures. In fact, the non-oil sectors of Timor-Leste's economy, particularly agriculture in its broadest sense, upon which most of the population still depend, have suffered under the seductive attractions of lucrative oil revenues. All of the productive primary industries, including food crops, fisheries and forestry production have been marginalised and underfunded since independence. By way of example, within the US\$1.7 billion national budget for Timor-Leste in 2014, a very modest US\$36 million, or just 2 per cent of the budget, was allocated to the agriculture portfolio, which also includes forestry and fisheries development. From another perspective, imports of subsidised Vietnamese rice, now well over 100,000 metric tonnes per annum, have effectively undercut and out-competed local producers, thereby creating a major deterrent to increased domestic production and undermining any prospects of food sovereignty in the future (Young 2013).<sup>2</sup> Even the coffee subsector, which has been the leading non-oil export commodity for many years (currently valued at US\$17.8 million per year), holds out little prospects for expansion or significantly increased yields (OEC n.d.).

One might conclude that policymakers in Timor-Leste have largely given up on agriculture as a prospective alternative pathway to prosperity, or at least as a major contributor to the economic future of the country. The reality is that despite the declining levels of oil and gas production and the absence of any significant new production fields and platforms under development, Timor-Leste remains overwhelmingly dependent on

---

2 Even as economic studies such as Young (2013) highlight the cost-effectiveness of imported rice versus domestic production.

its oil revenues at 76 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP). This compares with just 4.7 per cent of GDP derived from productive parts of the economy, largely limited to agriculture and local manufacturing (Scheiner 2015: 75). Moreover, this situation is unlikely to change anytime soon, because the current arrangements are providing windfall gains to well-positioned vested interests and beneficiaries of the bounteous flow of petro-dollars. This is also the point of Guteriano Neves when he concludes that:

A vision of the future of Timor-Leste based on oil is a vision that will decidedly benefit the elites. If we are to envision a future that includes and benefits everyone, it will have to be one without oil.

But it might also be one where the relative contribution of oil revenues is dramatically reduced.<sup>3</sup> Either way, the challenge of moving beyond the resource curse and building a vibrant, diverse and inclusive economy for the benefit of all remains an elusive one that looms increasingly large as time goes by.

So, in the spirit of offering a prospective contribution to the shape of this alternative economic landscape beyond the resource curse, I will close by highlighting one prospective new development sector within Timor-Leste. This is the rapid expansion of international labour migration opportunities for young workers and the subsequent growing return flow of cash remittances to grateful Timor-Leste households and communities.

For some years now, the Government of Timor-Leste has been actively supporting a number of formal bilateral agreements with regional neighbours (Malaysia, South Korea and Australia). These alliances have focused on temporary in-country employment arrangements that have enabled participants to generate lucrative savings through limited-term overseas work contracts (see Thu and Silva 2013; Wigglesworth and Fonseca 2016). While offering significant personal benefits for those involved and generating some US\$11.2 million in 2017 (Curtain 2018), these programs were overshadowed by the highly popular and spontaneous informal labour migration to Western Europe, and especially the United Kingdom. This latter pathway has attracted thousands of young, mostly male, participants from different areas of Timor-Leste, travelling on Portuguese passports and embracing low-skilled but comparatively

---

<sup>3</sup> The 2018 bilateral agreement between Timor-Leste and Australia to settle the maritime boundary in the Timor Sea paves the way for the much-delayed exploitation of the Greater Sunrise oil and gas fields and with it a major new source of petro-dollars in the longer term.

lucrative work in the service towns and factories of England and Northern Ireland (McWilliam 2012, 2015). Estimates that up to 16,000 young Timorese may have taken this option over recent years are based on data sourced from the Portuguese Embassy in Dili (Staff of the Census Team, pers. comm., 2015).<sup>4</sup>

In a study of the impact of Timorese labour migration to the United Kingdom (Reis et al. 2016), the authors reported data on overseas fund transfers into Timor-Leste. They looked specifically at cash transfers via Western Union and Moneygram facilities for the calendar year 2015. Western Union in particular is the preferred channel for delivering cash remittances into Dili by UK-based Timorese migrants. According to the report, a total of nearly US\$25 million (US\$24,933,632) was remitted in 2015, and of this amount fully 75 per cent of the funds derived from the United Kingdom (US\$18,700,227). In comparative terms, these transfers are greater than the total export value of the Timor-Leste coffee crop and the tourism industry. It means that informal labour migration may well now provide the most significant source of non-oil revenue for the country. I note that these figures are also likely to capture only a portion of the total remitted funds from UK employment, given that many returning and visiting labour migrants often carry with them substantial amounts of undeclared cash for distribution to relatives and family in Timor.<sup>5</sup>

Although the macro-economic impact of these cash remittances remains comparatively modest, the growth of the remittance economy in Timor-Leste is having powerful transformative effects for those households benefiting from regular infusions of cash (McWilliam 2012; Shuaib 2008).<sup>6</sup> These developments point to new opportunities for young people in Timor-Leste to imagine rather different futures for themselves than those of earlier generations; futures that go well beyond the distorting impacts of the resource curse and point to new and viable livelihood pathways to prosperity. I see these developments as grounds for optimism, offering the prospect that Timor-Leste will yet achieve the rewards of the 'good life', the *rai tempo diak*, that its citizens have long sought and surely deserve.

---

4 The 2015 National Census recorded a total of 5,345 Timor-Leste citizens living in what they classified as 'Other European Countries (excluding Portugal)', the vast majority of whom are likely to reside in Britain.

5 A widespread practice undertaken to avoid paying the high commissions charged by Western Union and as a kind of courier service for friends in the UK who wish to send money back to their own relatives.

6 The implications of the recent Brexit vote notwithstanding. Just how formal separation from the European Union affects Timorese work opportunities in Britain remains a work in progress.

## References

- Cascardi, A. J. (1992) *The subject of modernity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511597428.
- Curtain, R. (2018) 'Remittances biggest export earner for Timor-Leste after oil', *Devpolicy Blog*. Available at: [www.devpolicy.org/remittances-biggest-export-earner-for-timor-leste-after-oil-20180322/](http://www.devpolicy.org/remittances-biggest-export-earner-for-timor-leste-after-oil-20180322/) [accessed 15 July 2018].
- Fox, J. J. (ed.) (1980) *The flow of life: Essays on eastern Indonesia*, Harvard: Harvard University Press. doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674331907.
- Keane, W. (2007) *Christian moderns: Freedom and fetish in the mission encounter*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- McWilliam, A. R. (2012) 'New Fataluku diasporas and landscapes of remittance and return', *Global, Local: Identity, Security, Community*, vol. 11, pp. 72–85.
- McWilliam, A. R. (2015) 'Time and the other for transnational Timorese migrants: Changing patterns of engagement', paper presented at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, 18–22 November, Denver, Colorado.
- OECD (The Observatory of Economic Complexity) (n.d.) 'Timor-Leste', *OECD*. Available at: [atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/tls/#Exports](http://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/tls/#Exports) [accessed 12 December 2017].
- Reis J. S, Cabral, L. D. and Valentim, J. V. (2016) *Impaktu Traballador Iha Ingleterra no Norte Irlandia be Prosperiedade Familia iha Munisipiu Lautem*, Final report, Asia Foundation, Jakarta, with support of PLG (Policy Leaders Group) and Australian Aid.
- Scheiner, C. (2015) 'Can the Petroleum Fund exorcise the resource curse from Timor-Leste?', in Ingram S, Kent, L. and McWilliam, A. R. (eds) *A new era? Timor Leste after the UN*, Canberra: ANU Press, pp. 73–101. doi.org/10.22459/NE.09.2015.06.
- Scott, J. C. (1998) *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*, Yale: Yale University Press.
- Shuaib, F. (2008) *East Timor country report*, Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.
- Thu, P. M. and Silva, I. M. da (2013) *The Australian seasonal workers program: Timor-Leste's case*, SSGM In Brief 2013/13, Canberra: State, Society & Governance in Melanesia, ANU. Available at: [ips.cap.anu.edu.au/ssgm](http://ips.cap.anu.edu.au/ssgm).

- Weatherbee, D. (1966) 'Portuguese Timor: An Indonesian dilemma', *Asian Survey*, vol. 6, issue 2, pp. 683–695. doi.org/10.2307/2642194.
- Wigglesworth, A. and Fonseca, Z. (2016) 'Experiences of young Timorese as migrant workers in Korea'. Paper presented at the 2016 Australasian Aid Conference, Canberra.
- Young, P. (2013) *Impacts of rice imports on rice production in Timor-Leste*, Commissioned study for the Seeds of Life program, Dili: Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, Timor-Leste.

This text is taken from *The Promise of Prosperity: Visions of the Future in Timor-Leste*, edited by Judith Bovensiepen, published 2018 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.