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INTRODUCTION

Engaging Processes of Sense-Making and Negotiation in Contemporary Timor-Leste

Angie Bexley and Maj Nygaard-Christensen

Overview

The articles in this special issue build on past ethnographic inquiries and focus on political and social change since Timor-Leste's independence. One of the things we have found particularly exciting about researching post-independent Timor-Leste has been to carry out fieldwork in a context where not just researchers, but also our informants, are caught up in processes of 'sense-making', of determining what kind of place Timor-Leste as an independent nation is becoming. The reality of ethnographic research in such a context is far different from, as Ferguson (1999, 208) has it, 'the archetypal image of the anthropologist dropped into the middle of a cultural homogenous village community' where the researcher acquires from local informants a degree of 'cultural fluency'. Rather, while we as researchers have tried to learn about Timor-Leste, our informants, as citizens of a new nation, have been absorbed in a parallel process of learning, deliberating and at times contesting what kind of place Timor-Leste as an independent nation is, and should become in the future (see Kammen 2009). In other words, making sense of independent Timor-Leste has, over the past decade, been a project that preoccupies Timorese citizens as much as the foreign researcher. This issue addresses some of these processes of 'sense-making' and negotiation; and highlights the ambiguities and paradoxes, while stressing the heterogeneity and unpredictability of contemporary Timor-Leste.

In different but complementary ways, the articles attend to such processes of sense-making and to various forms of engagements with national historical and political

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transformations. To date, there has been a considerable effort to include local perspectives and experiences in anthropological analyses of Timor-Leste. Unlike the broad-scale focus of political science-oriented studies on the transformations of government, the elite and nation-state building (or its failure), anthropological studies have focused on Timorese perspectives and experiences, produced through long-term ethnographic immersion in local worlds.

The articles in this issue build on this anthropological focus by dealing with issues of negotiation of tradition, of the past and of Indonesia, past and present. New anthropological research on Timor-Leste has had a strong focus on tradition and customary governance and has primarily, though not exclusively, been conducted in rural areas of Timor-Leste. The two articles by Kelly da Silva and Victoria Kumala continue the focus on exchange and tradition both in urban and rural settings in contemporary Timor-Leste. Da Silva brings attention to the transformation of tradition in an urban setting brought about through urban, middle-class marriage mediators. Da Silva adds to contemporary arguments about the syncretic or anti-syncretic character of social experiences in East Timor. She concurs with Castro (2012) who asserts that while mystical practices are connected to certain power strategies to maintain agency over the world, the ways that these people deal with Christian entities end up reinforcing their local beliefs or power over the world. Da Silva asserts that the marriage negotiations of middle-class Timorese and 'the reproduction of local institutions...happen in a disguised way, because people are also interested in cultivating themselves as modern'. Both papers call for the acknowledgement of an integrated approach. Da Silva concludes that marriage exchange is a 'tripartite negotiation', between wife-takers and wife-givers in their origin groups, as well as their investment in forging themselves as modern and Christian. Kumala argues for anthropological scrutiny of conflict-related mental health discourses in Timor-Leste that predominantly have been influenced by psychological approaches. This is based on her findings that the collective performance of certain 'rituals does not merely reflect the importance of maintaining harmony between the living and the dead. It also highlights the interdependence between persons, collective and the living and the dead'.

Indeed, a strong theme in the existing literature has been the strategies by which people deal with the trauma of the occupation and violence (Bexley 2009; Crockford 2007; Kent 2011; Niner 2008). Angie Bexley and Nuno Rodrigues Tchailoro's article focuses on the complexities of the past from the perspective of young people who were active in the clandestine movement and their attempts to reconcile their former heroic status with their thwarted hopes and present marginal political position. The paper represents a new reflexive turn among former clandestine members. It also points to an important way of viewing youth beyond the 'defectology discourses' that have coloured analysis on youth in international development agency and government agendas. The paper seeks to understand how the category of youth has been constituted in relation to forms of power and the limited success young revolutionaries have in adapting to post-conflict scenarios.

On the same theme of dealing with the past, Henri Myrntinen's and Maj Nygaard-Christensen's articles touch on the often vexed topic of negotiating Indonesia in post-colonial Timor-Leste. Both add to the picture on how analyses of political cultures in Indonesia can prove fruitful in understanding contemporary Timor-Leste (see Bexley 2007, 2009). Myrntinen's analysis of ninja rumours demonstrates how a phenomenon well known from Indonesian popular and political debates—the ninja—continues to thrive in a Timorese political context, thus suggesting that the political legacy of the New Order continues 'to reverberate in both countries'. Nygaard-Christensen engages more specifically with this theme, by examining the impact of the Indonesian political genealogy on Timorese imaginaries of democracy and the ambiguous ways in which Indonesia is negotiated in contemporary Timor-Leste.

Exchange and Tradition in Contemporary Timor-Leste

Articles by Kelly da Silva and Victoria Kumala engage with transformations in exchange practices and renegotiations of tradition in contemporary Timor-Leste. The articles demonstrate that the ways people engage with tradition are constantly in flux. 'Tradition' and exchange practices, in other words, are constantly redefined through negotiation and contestation in shifting historical contexts. Victoria Kumala's article shows how dramatic political change and conflict disrupt exchange practices and alliances and demonstrates how the emotional distress experienced by kin of victims killed in the Passabe massacre after the referendum, goes beyond the event of the loss itself and the individual affected. It shows how unresolved or 'unpaid' bad deaths led to 'a chain of blockages in paths of exchanges between different alliances'.

Kelly da Silva's article on brokers or spokespersons involved in marriage negotiations demonstrates how these are fraught with controversy and contestation. The article also sheds light on the ambivalence with which people negotiate such practices. Kelly da Silva proposes that the social brokers involved in marriage negotiations on the one hand 'stressed the importance of *kultura* for people's identity, mutual respect and social cohesion', while at the same time 'asserted the need to *modernise* it'. The article reveals how the legitimacy of marriage brokers in Dili rests on their ability to tap into distinct sources of authority that relate not only to the *foho* (mountains) and their association with origin groups and ancestors, but also to a kind of authority associated with modernity such as education and the ability to obtain a prestigious job in the capital.

Indeed, such reimagining of tradition in the context of becoming modern subjects is far from a characteristic of Timorese urban culture alone, but one we have found to be evident in local debates in rural districts as well. Though our informants in both Dili and rural districts remain engaged in practices of barlaque and other forms of ritual, new critiques of tradition are simultaneously emerging, as people experiment in various ways with distancing themselves from 'tradition' in the pursuit of becoming modern subjects. In continuation of this, we suggest that it might be meaningful to pay more analytical attention to the ambivalence

and contestations that characterise Timorese negotiations of both tradition and modernity.

Negotiating the Past

The papers by Bexley and Tchailoro and by Kumala deal with unresolved issues of the past that have found no place within the post-colonial state's redefinition as it struggles to distance itself from the violence inflicted on its people and coercing nature of the resistance movement in the pursuit of independence. Instead, as noted by Kumala, the issues of the past 'shape the everyday realities of families, individuals and interpersonal relations'.

Both articles seek to unpack themes discussed by Traube (2007) who, in her fieldwork among the Mambai, identified a national trope of suffering, justice and recompense. Suffering became associated with official nationalist discourses during the Indonesian occupation, while the notion of 'purchasing' power, Traube notes, resonates with the Christian economy of salvation. Traube situates Timorese political thinking in light of the nation-state through the Mambai idiom of reciprocity: 'whoever benefited from or caused suffering owes them payment for their fatigue or wages (*selu kolen*)' (Traube 2007, 10). Kumala argues, in line with Kent (2011), that local memory practices can be understood as 'political struggles for justice and truth, and recognition of individuals and groups'. The surviving families of the Passabe massacre have claimed financial assistance from the Timorese government in order to deliver payment for delayed mortuary rituals. The young Timorese in Bexley and Tchailoro's article, however, no longer expect recompense and instead their local memory practices of reflecting on their role within the resistance movement serve as lingering, non-triumphalist acrimony in the reshaping of the post-colonial state.

Both the papers by Bexley and Tchailoro and Kumala seek to understand the strategies of people to deal with situations that are analogous to what have been described as massive or social trauma, 'a wound to the social body and its cultural frame' (Robben 2005, 125). They differ in how their informants are able to deal with this 'wound'. For the villagers of Passabe the performance of certain rituals offers some amelioration to the 'blockages'. The young Timorese of the clandestine movement, however, are unable to heal the wounds principally because the power invested in 'youth' by the resistance movement has been removed in the transition to the post-colonial state.

Negotiating Indonesia

Henri Myrtilinen and Maj Nygaard-Christensen both draw attention to a relatively understudied aspect of contemporary Timor-Leste, namely the ambivalent position of Indonesia after independence, and the routes through which powerful Indonesian cultural and political symbols come to acquire new meaning in a Timorese political context. They thus fill a gap in Timor studies where few analyses have so far

examined the ways in which people actively draw on the Indonesian heritage (with the exception of Bexley 2007, 2009), or the more subtle ways in which this legacy gives form to popular and political debates. As suggested in Nygaard-Christensen's analysis, this absence might be traced to the Indonesian occupation. Attempts by resistance members to distance themselves from the horrors of the Indonesian occupation by presenting Indonesia as monolithically negative, has had a strong impact upon academic scholarship on Timor-Leste throughout the occupation.

As proposed in the contributions from Myrntinen and Nygaard-Christensen, however, the influence of Indonesia in contemporary Timor-Leste is much more complex. Myrntinen explores the occurrence of 'ninja panics' in Timor-Leste, known particularly from New Order Indonesia, which have now become prevalent in post-independent Timor-Leste. Nygaard-Christensen's article identifies Indonesia as an influential if ambivalent reference point in Timorese debates that figures at once as the shadow that Timorese political leaders are constantly required to distance themselves from and, simultaneously as a model of modernity, state potency and nostalgic longings. In both articles, the legacy of Indonesia occurs against the backdrop of disorder and insecurity.

Of course, Indonesia is far from the sole source of inspiration for Timorese political imaginaries and national identity. Rather than viewing nation-building in Timor-Leste as merely a process of building institutions or identifying a particular or singular version of national identity (Leach et al. 2012), this collection of papers suggests the multiple ways in which Timorese borrow and test different and sometimes oppositional sources of identity. Hence, Timorese nation-building practices might be seen as always unfinished processes of negotiation and deliberation, rather than something absolute.

Evident in all of the themes highlighted in the articles of this edition is an attempt to understand nation-building as a 'collaborative' and 'frictional' project (Tsing 2005) involving many participants, rather than a 'clash between paradigms' as some analyses of Timorese nation-building practices claim (Hohe 2002), whether between modernity and tradition, the urban and the rural or between the colonised and the coloniser (Nygaard-Christensen 2010; Bexley 2009). By emphasising the co-constitutive nature of nation building, the articles in this edition exemplify the tensions inherent within the process of 'sense-making' in which both researchers and Timorese people are constantly engaged.

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