Chapter 6

Neighbors and Kin: ASEAN as an Ecumene? Reality Constructions from a Timorese Perspective

Paulo Castro Seixas, Nuno Canas Mendes and Nadine Lobner

1 Introduction

ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. As one of the core regions of the world, the grouping has received much attention in international relations and the political discourses of recent years (He, 2006; Caballero-Anthony, 2014; Acharya, 2017; Nishimura, Ambashi & Iwasaki, 2019; Yam, 2019). These discourses mainly frame the grouping within an economic and a geopolitical context, while the sociocultural construction of ASEAN seems to be absent from debate in scientific discourses. We want to explore the construction of meanings beyond borders within the context of the regional grouping, trying to understand its positioning within a globalization and transnationalism discourse. We ask if there is a strong bottom-up narrative of ASEAN as an international entity, or if it is a matter of geostrategic politics and economy only. Are there bottom-up narratives towards international matters at all? And above all, how can ASEAN, as one of the main regions, be understood internationally when approached through the sociocultural avenue of a small country? We want to tackle this issue through a case study of Timor-Leste, which has been standing on the threshold of the regional grouping since 1975. We believe that voices from inside the country and translocal imaginations are a convenient realm for exploring ASEAN in its ecumenical dimension.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

In theoretical-conceptual terms, we aim to analyze the scientific issue presented based on a globalization and transnationalism framework of anthropological discourses complementary to international relations discourses. Understanding that the avenue of regional organizations is mainly tackled through economic and political perspectives (Adler, 2017; Beier, 2005; Montison, 2018), our aim is to broaden the debate on the problem of space in an interdisciplinary manner. In order to understand the meaning that constitutes relations between the local and the global, we propose that the understanding of space needs to be (re)considered. Furthermore, we propose that
bottom-up approaches for constructing international regions are strongly engaged with ‘carrying ideas beyond borders’, embedded within a translocality approach. With the start of the new century, ‘Translocality’ has received much attention in a multitude of scientific strands. Nevertheless, focusing primarily on an anthropological approach, authors such as Escobar (2001), Appadurai (1995), Peleikis (2003), Gottowik (2010), Greiner & Sakdapolrak (2013) and others have made important contributions to this ‘new’ research path within the beyond-border realm. The term translocality itself usually tackles “phenomena involving mobility, migration, circulation, and spatial interconnectedness not necessarily limited to national boundaries” (Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013, p. 4), which goes beyond the classic framework of transnationalism studies.

These new transnationalism trends have been one of the subjects of in-depth discussion by Oaks & Schein (2006), Tenhunen (2011), Brickel & Datta (2011) and Emrich & Schroeder (2018). Such a translocal construction understanding includes the growing importance of the dimension of imaginations and how they establish links towards the world at large, which is why we see it as a relevant tool for approaching our research question. Translocality is a research and interpretation realm which, in the present day, already includes a multitude of perspectives on global-local interactions in an interdisciplinary manner. By no means do we aim to exclude these important (beyond) transnationalism approaches from our work, yet what is of core interest for our research is to understand translocal imaginations within an ecumene construction domain. Translocal imaginations, as defined by Brickel & Datta (2011, p. 18), frame the imagining of links between places which go beyond a ‘traditional’ understanding of fixed nation-state boundaries. Our purpose is to “challenge regional limitations [...] and emphasize that the world is constituted through processes that transcend boundaries on different scales” (Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013, p. 6).

1.2 Translocality, the Ecumene and International Regions

For understanding ASEAN as an international region from an anthropological perspective, we will analyze local narratives from Timor-Leste. For this matter, we take a “multi-sited, translocal approach between and within various localities” (Murphy, 2008 in Darling-Wolf, 2014) to be of great importance, using concepts such as the global ecumene (Hannerz, 1992) and translocal imaginations (Oaks & Schein, 2006; Tenhunen, 2011; Brickel & Datta, 2011) as support for the analysis. These items serve for exploring local links to a larger context, closely observing the micro-macro interactions. When applying a translocality approach for understanding links between the local-global space, “the concrete conditions under which various local/national environments relate to each other in a globalized world” (Darling-Wolf, 2015, p. 2) come to the fore. Furthermore, translocality as such is “used to describe socio-spatial dynamics
and processes of simultaneity and identity formation that transcend boundaries, including, but also extending beyond, those of nation-states” (Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013).

This beyond-border issue will be contextualized through the kinship and amity domain, bearing in mind that Timor-Leste’s local narratives (our case study) mainly refer to family and friendship relationships when talking about the inside-outside realm and the relations between states. We propose that kinship and amity imaginations can be seen as metaphors for creating international regions. Our quest is how “individuals imagine the global as cultural products and social relations” (Giddens, 1990, p. 21, in Darling-Wolf, 2014) and what kind of ‘new spaces’ evolve out of these.

This work is constructed on two main moments: firstly, bibliographical research and a literature review, and secondly, the application and interpretation of previously gathered field data from our CRISEA interviews. Our work is based on a social constructivism approach, through which we aim to use relationships and interactions to understand the larger dynamics prevailing: ASEAN built as an international region from the bottom up. As international region contexts have been mainly observed from the perspective of economy and politics, we believe it is of great relevance to understand (as we propose, complementary) sociocultural ones. These, we suggest, may bring a clearer understanding of the context of the world at large through the anthropological approach of using voices from bottom-up: reality as a product of social interactions and relationships, embedded in temporal and spatial boundaries of cultural dynamics.

This chapter is built on three sections: firstly, a bidimensional literature review on existing debates about ASEAN and its role in international matters. Secondly, we present two sets of narratives (i. Narratives from the library, ii. Narratives from the field) from Timor-Leste to understand its beyond-border constructions from the bottom up. We aim to show how our data contribute to the building of ASEAN as an international space of important cultural exchange: an ecumene. In conclusion, the relationship between Timor-Leste and ASEAN will be further put into perspective to recognize the interplay between the global and the local.

2 Beyond-border Relations: A Bidimensional Perspective

Beyond-border relations is a domain which is embedded in various dimensions. We can frame these into four main dimensions, which, of course, do have their own strands within. These four dimensions can be understood through the strand of international relations on the one hand and through anthropology...
on the other: the economic and political dimension in the former and the social and cultural in the latter. We believe it is of great importance to establish an interdisciplinary debate when it comes to issues in the world at large. This approach aims to contribute to broadening consciousness and awareness by taking a variety of voices and using them to explore global complexities. However, this approach is far from having been comprehensively dealt with in scientific discourses, where the dimension outlined above is divided up much too often.

In international relations discourses, this issue has already received some attention in previous years. Through constructivism approaches, the processes for understanding the context of the world at large seem to increasingly incorporate the social and cultural dimension – or at least acknowledge the previous lack of it. There is growing awareness of the importance of the interconnection of the economic-political and sociocultural, knowing full well that at times of intense movement and change, larger issues can only be seized when both the local and the global are taken into consideration (Reus-Smit, 2019; Acharya, 2005).

This issue exists not only in the field of international relations studies. Anthropological perspectives are also in need to increasingly adapt to economic-political discourses when looking at global contexts through local matters (Eriksen & Neumann, 1993). The concern of this chapter is to understand the economic-political construction of a regional organization from the standpoint of sociocultural narratives within an international context. Hence, as we move towards this theme through ASEAN as one of the main global players, we will present a literature review on how ASEAN is represented within two diverse yet interacting points of view as they are predominant in scientific discourses: international relations/politics and anthropology/sociology.

3 ASEAN as a Relationship between States: A Literature Review

The initial aim of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations regional organization, established in 1967 as a post-Second World War construction, was to create a protective ground for a togetherness of states located within the geographical area of Southeast Asia. The objective of the ASEAN community was to provide a base for promoting human rights and democracy, similar to what had taken place in other regions, such as the EU, the Pacific Community, the Organization of American States and others. As ASEAN conducts important international negotiations in economic and political affairs, it is now seen as a “global powerhouse” (Lee, 2018).
Tracing the grouping from this perspective should provide a brief insight into how it is mainly depicted in scientific discourses. ASEAN is, to a broad extent, discussed from the institutional side and its role as an economic-political togetherness of states acting on a global scale. These discourses are predominant in international relations studies through which it can be seen as a common meaning and unity of actions between several states within a geographically locatable territory (He, 2006; Singh, 2011; Frost, 2013; Caballero-Anthony, 2014; Croissant, 2016).

Furthermore, ongoing discourses discuss ASEAN as a regional organization within a certain framework of integration dynamics, which also largely covers the political and economic dimensions, followed by the supposedly sociocultural ones (three ASEAN pillars) and the groupings leadership role towards the togetherness of member states (Sudo, 2006; Lee, 2010; Acharya, 2017). Its free trade agreements play another important role in scientific debate on ASEAN. The international contexts which are created through global trade negotiations remain in the forefront in attempting to understand the dynamics of the regional organization in the world at large. The focus continues to be the quest for a better economy, security and politics (Ganesan, 2000; He, 2007; Albert & Maizland, 2019).

Nevertheless, there is also a more constructivist attitude towards ASEAN, which discusses its member states through the quest for regional identity construction and social interconnectedness (Jones, 2010; Acharya, 2017). Even though communities and social structures are considered in these approaches, they do not go far beyond the state as the central actor for constructing an (international) regional realm (Nye, 2008). Hence, ASEAN, within an international regional organization context through its sociocultural dimensions is barely touched on in scientific literature discourses. As the concept of ROS is a rather institutional and economic-political one which aims to make the togetherness of states understandable in pursuing common goals, actions and the convictions of their interconnection, the sociocultural realm, even though it inevitably plays a role in state relations on a macro-scale, is poorly debated or analyzed.

Nevertheless, Southeast Asia within its geographical context has received some attention in sociocultural discourses as well. Several authors discuss cultural, religious and ethnic diversities/encounters within the region, the distinction between inter-regional spaces and the complexities these diversities bring to light for the eventual unity of the region (Steedly, 1999; Zialcita, 2003; Gerke & Evers, 2006). Even if in a rather geographical analysis, the social dimension comes well to the fore in the book Southeast Asian Localities: A Geography of Knowledge and Politics of Space (Kratoska, Schulte-Nordholt & Raben, 2008).
In their book, the region is looked at from a variety of perspectives in order to grasp its quest for relevance for the togetherness of the states located within it. Transnational flows are considered in a unique way, as there has only been limited use of these in scientific discussions when trying to look at the region in its ‘totality’. A very frequent point of analysis in SEA discourses is the observation of interregional ethnic groups and boundaries. However, these analyses do not go beyond the regional idea with its geographical limitations, despite the inclusion of historical circumstances in a (post)colonial framework. In conclusion, SEA, or rather, ASEAN is, as far as we know, not yet understood in its international embeddedness through the social dimension. Anthropological debates on Southeast Asia mainly draw on the postcolonial nation-state construction and the building of identity and ethnicity discourses within the region. The predominant quest seems to be to discover who the people we can call “Southeast Asians” are and what structures they are embedded in.

As literature demonstrates (Lande, 1999; Kratoska, Schulte-Nordholt & Raben, 2008; Scott, 2009; Hack, 2012), the region itself cannot be explained, described or understood through fixed, stable and unchangeable phenomena. Moreover, it is necessary to pay attention to its international embeddedness and regional, cross-border interconnection at varying levels and degrees, instead of seeing it as a homogenous area with clearly distinguishable entities. The region which is called Southeast Asia and the people that inhabit this area went through a broad complexity of historical occasions which are embedded within an international context, not least through its historical and (post)colonial experiences. Not only is Southeast Asia shaped by shifting forms of domination, power and violent occupation by Western empires, but there has also been constant relocation of ethnic groups throughout the reconfiguration of political structures, the emergence of nation-states and the adoption of new forms of power, interacting with traditional, local systems of structuring societies (Kratoska, Schulte-Nordholt & Raben, 2008).

Next, we propose that in our everyday faster moving and more interactive world, the realm of space needs to be carefully reconsidered, which is why we also aim to expand our own approach towards understanding a regional construct – as is the case of ASEAN – within the global realm. As there is a lack of exclusively bottom-up perspectives on ASEAN (Southeast Asia as a region) and how it may be built as a space of meaningful cultural exchange, we will approach this issue in further steps through our case study. That is to say, the building of ASEAN as an international region, from the bottom up, people-to-people, through imaginations and perceptions in order to cope with (and construct) a new sociocultural reality of the relationship between states.
In the next section, we will explore our case study of Timor-Leste for a clearer understanding of this gap in literature: bottom-up beyond-border reality constructions.

4 A Case Study: Timor-Leste’s Translocal Imaginations

Timor-Leste and its beyond-border realm have been receiving more and more attention over the past 15 years. This complexity is comprehensively discussed through the country’s inside-outside relations, which are presented through two main strands (which are, to a great extent, complementary): the modern perspective with a focus on institutions and the nation-state (Seixas, Hohe, Leach, Silva & Simão) and the “traditional” perspective with a focus on narratives located within the precolonial era, myths of origin and a kinship/amity domain (Traube, 2011; Fox, 2011; McWilliam, 2014; Bovensiepen, 2015; Sousa, 2010).

Nevertheless, before exploring this avenue further, we need to take a closer look at why this domain is relevant for understanding ASEAN as an international region, built on translocal imaginations. In previous studies, we approached this issue through Timor-Leste’s relationship with the regional grouping, followed by its links to other international regions. We proposed that, depending on various social contexts, Timor-Leste constructs a new realm through perceptions, imaginations and world views from below, creating a space of intense cultural exchange within the world at large: the ecumene (Lobner, 2020; Lobner & Seixas, 2020). As discussed earlier in this chapter, exploring regional organizations from the bottom-up perspective of translocal imaginations seems to have barely been touched on as a research avenue. Our attempt is to contribute to filling this gap, which we believe to be of great relevance when considering the geopolitical and sociocultural world context for understanding its dynamics as an inter-relational matter between the global and the local.

In order to explore this complexity, we first undertook to collect anthropological Timor-Leste narratives about the beyond-border realm from within the anthropological library, followed by the narratives which we gathered in the field.

4.1 Narratives from the Library

The library narrative brought us to a double bind set of discussions with two different interpretation strands. However, it must be understood that these strands are complementary and are strongly interdependent. We created a
table with the main arguments on Timor-Leste’s inside-outside relations, as they are predominant in anthropological literature:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kinship and Cosmology</th>
<th>Institutions and the Modern Nation-State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Myths of Origin</td>
<td>Independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older/Younger Brothers</td>
<td>UN peacebuilding mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stranger Kings</td>
<td>Nation building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clan structures/Uma Lulik</td>
<td>Foreign NGO presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male/Female</td>
<td>Political patterns: democracy vs. patronage/clientelism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As presented in the first cluster in the table, a kinship and cosmology narrative is predominant in literature. Based on this, there are several influential works from the past 30 years tackling how the small country’s society distinguishes the ‘inside’ from the ‘outside’. We can take a closer look at the first cluster: myths of origin. Myths of origin are a relevant domain in Timorese social organization (Fox, 1986; Schulte-Nordholt, 1971; Traube, 2011; McWilliam, 2014; Sousa, 2010; et al.). A core narrative with a great number of variations is on the relationship and disputes between the older and younger brother. In most cases, the younger brother went abroad and came back to Timor under (depending on the myth) specific circumstances. A narrative which is often understood as a coping strategy by the small country to deal with foreign power relations (Fox, 2011; Traube, 2011; Seixas, 2008; Van Engelenhoven, 2010; Bovensiepen, 2015; Hohe, 2005, p. 2). As used by Fox (2011), the stranger king narrative, within the Austronesian linguistic region, is to be understood as a tool to cope with the takeover by a foreign power in colonial times: “... indigenous presence and the coming of an outsider or an outside group, […] who alters the structure of the society” (Fox, 2011, p. 202). Furthermore, the story of the crocodile is another relevant ancient narrative, which opens up to the imagination of a boy sailing around the globe on a crocodile which, at the end of the ‘adventure’ settled where the island of Timor1 is to be found (Wise, 2006; Gomes, 1972; Seixas, 2008). In several myths, clans are divided through older-younger brother imaginations in a Lulik (sacred) discourse. The dimensions of the male

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1 The island of Timor is often said to resemble a crocodile.
and the female also support the distinction of the inside and the outside (Fox, 1986; McWilliam, 2014; Traube, 2011).

A variety of narratives show Timor-Leste to be at the root of everything, the ancient center of the world – a big moon from which everything descends (Schulte-Nordholt, 1971; Fox, 1989; Seixas, 2016, p. 420). Hence, certain ethnographies open up this debate on installing the ‘outsider’ inside (Fox, 1989; Seixas, 2008; Engelenhoven, 2010; Bovensiepen, 2015; et al.). Following this brief outline, what comes clearly to the fore is that imaginations on cosmology and kinship are tools for coping with quests in the world at large, the beyond-border realm as a translocal imagining by the small country. We propose that ancient narratives and the often-used kinship terminology greatly contribute to the building of international regions from the bottom up, where a “translocal perspective provides a vehicle to engage with subjective and phenomenological dimensions of place making” (Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013, p. 10).

As this is complementary to the second cluster in Table 2, the ‘modernity’ approach, we can consider a set of ethnographies more closely. These samples are closer to what we have discussed as state relations, including post-independence institutional discourses and nation-state building (Hohe, 2002; Silva & Simão, 2012; Seixas, 2016; Scambary, 2019) and political patronage and clientelism patterns within a supposedly democratic system (Aspinall, Hicken, Scambary & Weiss, 2018). These approaches lead to the debate in international relations discourses in conjunction with anthropological approaches for understanding the beyond-border realm through translocal imaginations. Within these ethnographic works, the reciprocity between tradition and modernity is considered, in order to understand how the inside is incorporating (and coping with) the outside, as is the case, for example, with the UN presence in post-independence Timor-Leste (Hohe, 2002; Seixas, 2010; Silva & Simão, 2012).

As mentioned earlier in this section, foreign presence is often explained through translocal imaginations of a kinship setting: “the younger brother who came to resolve the violence” (Hohe, 2002, p. 1). This serves as another example of how the small country constructs the inside-outside realm through emotional proximity. Even though the geographically distant space of Portugal (and through this, Europe and the CPLP) is described as a younger brother, Indonesia (and the context of occupation) – Timor-Leste’s spatially proximate neighbor – is in many narratives represented as “the presence of the common” (Hohe, 2002, p. 5). The narrative of the brothers seems to be an ever-present “tool” for coping with beyond-border relations, used as a situational function depending on the context. Therefore, ASEAN can be interpreted through translocal imaginations as the older brother, that is – through Timor-Leste – of…
the same kind – interconnected with the younger brother within the context of the world at large (ASEAN, Europe, CPLP):

The Portuguese once invaded the country as yB [younger brothers] to pacify when oB [older brothers] were fighting against oB. Now that the “Javanese” are classified as oB, “Javanese” and Timorese are involved in a violent relationship as oBs. UNAMET arrives, representing the contrasting value category “yB” to pacify its older brothers. Additionally UNAMET is assembled out of many different nations. This time not only does Portugal arrive as yB, but agents of all nations. They all came.

Hohe, 2002, p. 9

This reference underlines the situational use of translocal imaginations: modern foreign institutional presence such as UNAMET may be the younger brother who comes back from the ‘outside’ (interpreted as a rather lose idea of the West) in order to contribute to the country’s well-being – namely, everyone outside of ASEAN. This narrative sample reinforces the link created through Timor-Leste, ASEAN (through Indonesia) and the rest of the world.

As the findings from the library demonstrate, the world may be understood as a gigantic family in Timorese terms, which contributes much to the building of a global space of meaningful cultural exchange. The narrative of the older-younger brothers remains through both approaches, tradition and modernity. Yet, they seem to be used situationally, as it “always depends” on the context (Hohe, 2002, p. 1). Hence, the link between the inside and the outside, as it is established through translocal imaginations, serves for understanding what we try to pinpoint within the realm of ASEAN: an international region in the making.

4.2 Narratives from the Field
As we undertook fieldwork to explore the relationship between ASEAN and Timor-Leste within the CRISEA project, we collected 30 interviews with three social clusters: state actors, civil society representatives and youth. These

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2 ‘It always depends’ is a phrase commonly used in Timor-Leste which enables negotiation with various contexts. Using the ethnography of Hohe as an example, Indonesians are referred to as being of the same kind (hence, the older brother). When following this ethnographic narrative, older brothers do not have a good relationship with each other, which could be used as a strategy for coping with the former Indonesian invasion (as opposed to the case with “the younger brother who comes to resolve the violence”) (Hohe, 2002, p. 1).

3 This data collection took place during the CRISEA research for the purpose of understanding the complexity of ASEAN’s centrality for Timor-Leste. Aside from this precise approach, we
interviews revealed strong kinship and amity terminology when referring to regional organizations and, more specifically, to ASEAN in a global context. In order to continue with the presentation of our data, we want to provide a table which frames the predominant indicators while tackling the beyond-border realm of the small nation in terms of international relations.

As we tackled the precise context of ASEAN and Timor-Leste relations in our fieldwork for the previous CRISEA research subject, the data we collected concern how the small country perceives (demonstrated through the three social clusters used as samples) the “outside” world and uses it in various situational metaphors. Kinship and amity terminology is most frequently used when referring to the inside-outside realm in institutional and diplomatic state (and regional) contexts. This means that our interviewees, as can be seen in Table 2, referred to ASEAN as their neighbors, their friends and create a further distinction in using phrases such as “Timor-Leste is not Asian enough”. When looking at ASEAN and its beyond border context, a greater family narrative comes to the fore. Therefore, when referring to Europe and in many cases the CPLP, our social clusters understand an emotional/family proximity, which seems to be different in SEA regional terms. Next, we will present some interview excerpts for enlarging on our discussion:

4.2.1 Excerpt 1

For the nation’s cooperation, for their negotiating partnership for ... many nations like the CPLP, these are like older brothers and younger brothers. The CPLP, it comes from there. Right now, they continue to maintain the relationship as older brothers and younger brothers, to establish history and establish development as a partnership. With Australia and

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Table 6.2Narratives from the field

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASEAN</th>
<th>Beyond</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia: Friends</td>
<td>Europe/CPLP: Younger Brothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbors</td>
<td>Brothers from abroad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diplomatic relations</td>
<td>Family context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timor-Leste not Asian enough</td>
<td>Timor-Leste &amp; Portugal common ground</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

were also able to use the data collected to broaden our analysis and embed it into a wider context.
Indonesia ... it is more a trilateral relationship between neighboring nations, to further establish the relationship at sea and on land, to cooperate through material things, like the humanitarian aid that exists.

CRISEA Interview PA2, October 2018

As can be seen from this first interview excerpt, the (international) regional organization context is referred to metaphorically through kinship and amity terminology. Referring to older and younger brothers in the geographically rather distant community of the CPLP needs to be looked at more closely. In Timorese conceptualizations, Portugal, as also discussed in the previous section on narratives within literature, is in most cases perceived through family terms (yet, ‘it always depends’). This may be a strategy for coping with former colonization and/or a strategic continuance of a strong bond due to history, language, official democratic political patterns, human rights discourses, religious systems and bilateral/multilateral relations. What chiefly comes to the fore in this interview excerpt is the notion of a trilateral relationship with neighboring states, such as Australia and Indonesia, which leads to the interpretation that neighboring countries that are in geographic proximity are not necessarily related to Timor-Leste in family terms in this particular case. This is mainly relevant to our discussion due to the link with Indonesia and, therefore, ASEAN, understanding that a diplomatic friendship approach is applied, rather than an emotional proximity of kinship clusters. This is particularly relevant when considering the case of Indonesia. Indonesia, as outlined above, is not seen as kin in any of the empirical cases; rather, through a diplomatic approach, in which the country is perceived as a friendly neighbor. Taking this emotional proximity and distance within international region contexts into account, another interview excerpt reveals relevant data for our discussion:

4.2.2 Excerpt 2

It is one thing for Timor to become a member of regional organizations such as ASEAN, the CPLP is another thing. With the CPLP, historically speaking, Timor-Leste has a similar context of interests, because of shared history. Countries which were colonies of Portugal share an

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4 It needs to be understood that the official state structure does not imply that other forms of political structures are predominant, as clearly seen through patronage and clientelism politics (Aspinall, Hicks, Scambary & Weiss, 2018). Nevertheless, its official democratic system differs greatly from the region’s autocratic and military regimes.

5 Christianity on the surface.
emotional historical relationship. Related to other respects we may continue to discuss, but I think that the CPLP is also linked to ASEAN. ASEAN countries are also proud when a country in their organization is a member of an organization in a different region. Timor-Leste can become an instrument for ASEAN civil society and CPLP civil society in order to work together, share knowledge and regional issues. This means that they cannot be closed, they must be open. Now, ASEAN’s civil society must also know that there would be an opportunity to access the space of the CPLP through Timor-Leste, in order to access the civil society space in Europe.

Interview CS4, October 2018

This excerpt clearly shows that our social clusters understand the important relevance of an interrelation between regional matters on a global scale. Bearing in mind that CPLP is an international organization which cannot be geographically encompassed in a single glance at a map (as opposed to the case of Southeast Asia), our interviewee constructs a link between two regional constructs of different kinds. This link, according to the interviewee, could be Timor-Leste, as a middle-ground, a facilitator to establish a connection. Understanding this within an international context, the relevance of ASEAN as a space of strong intercultural encounters – an ecumene – comes to the fore. Although our respondent relates historically (and emotionally) more to CPLP, ASEAN seems to be a key for Timor-Leste in order to create an international meeting and exchange zone.

When delving more deeply into this area, we can take a closer look at other kinship-amity terminology within the discourse of Timor-Leste and ASEAN (concerning the still ongoing membership procedure):

4.2.3 Excerpt 3

Well, if we are in an organization of course we are going to follow the rules of engagement with that organization. But that doesn’t mean that as a sovereign country we cannot be friends with another person, like you married your husband but that doesn’t mean that you abandon all your friends. You need to have friends still!

Interview PA6, September 2018

Here, the interviewee refers to ASEAN as a family, which Timor-Leste, metaphorically speaking, would marry, in the event of becoming a member of the grouping. Our interpretation remains as follows: if referring to kinship and amity relations (marriage, friendship) in the context of international
regions, the perception of family and its meanings on a macro-level come to the fore. This can be understood as translocal imagination based on kinship emerging from local social organization in order to justify international state relations.

The following interview excerpt is another relevant sample for the intersubjective projection and construction of ASEAN as an international region. Here, similar to a previous excerpt, the relevance of the link between regions – in which Timor-Leste is again proposed as a facilitator – is shown:

4.2.4 Excerpt 4

Fieldworker: It was good to have approached this other area now, because at the article and academic level, it is often invoked as one of the obstacles to Timor’s membership, the fact that Timor is playing, let’s say, in several areas, such as at the level of the CPLP, or concerning the Pacific Islands Forum ... To what extent do you consider this to be seen as an obstacle [for ASEAN]?

Interviewee: From our point of view, I think it’s not a hindrance. It’s even an opportunity. For example, in relation to the Pacific Islands Forum, it is a fact that there are certain restrictions which imply not belonging to two regional organizations at the same time. Now, in relation to the CPLP, it is no longer a regional organization, it is already trans-regional, so there actually cannot be such problems of membership.

Interview CS4, October 2018

As we interpret this excerpt, it serves as another perception of ASEAN building a space of meaningful cultural exchange – the ecumene. International connections seem to be established through translocal imaginations which enable a global link between regions through bottom-up constructions. This is very much in line with what we have outlined to be a relevant tool for international relations and anthropology: the interaction between the micro and the macro for understanding matters in the world at large. Demonstrated through the excerpt samples, the building of the ‘inside-outside’ realm in our case study often seems to be arbitrary, ‘depending on the situation’. Even though ASEAN is described more as a neighbor in most of the samples, it is understood as a relevant domain for establishing a strong link within a larger realm. Creating such a link between international zones through Timor-Leste as a middle-ground leads to the building of international regions from the bottom up through translocal imaginations legitimizing global links.
Yet, we need to ask what this may mean for ASEAN international regionalism. Is there relevance in Timor-Leste’s beyond-border relations for the construction of ASEAN as an area for meaningful cultural encounters? Are imaginations from a small country that, on the one hand, is geographically part of the region but, on the other hand, stands on the threshold of the grouping, a relevant domain for exploring the organization’s bottom-up top-down constitution in a global context?

5 ASEAN as an Ecumene: An International Region in the Making

In the first two sections of this chapter, we outlined Southeast Asia (ASEAN) through two theoretical perspectives: a relationship between states on the one hand, and a sociocultural relationship on the other. We demonstrated these two perspectives through discourses on international relations and anthropological discourses. As can be seen from these two approaches, ASEAN – and as such, the Southeast Asian Region – is mainly understood through economic-political discourses in which its role as a global powerhouse comes to the fore. Therefore, as we tried to find sociocultural discourses about the region, there is, to the best of our knowledge, no narrative that tackles the regional organization through bottom-up debate. We believe the absent debate on ASEAN as a socially constructed international region is a relevant issue to be approached. Our aim was to tackle this rather new research avenue through a case study. As we see Timor-Leste as a convenient ground for exploring this problem, our previous research on the relationship between the small country and the regional grouping has opened the door towards exploring the building of international regionalism. In the later sections of this chapter, we presented some examples of how Timor-Leste’s society (represented through three social clusters for analysis) copes with state relations from the bottom up. More precisely, we presented two sets of data: 1) ethnographies which were collected on Timor-Leste’s inside-outside relations, 2) interview data samples which we collected from previous research projects within the CRISEA framework.

As our empirical data reveals, there is a strong narrative by Timor-Leste which distinguishes its relationship with ASEAN from its relationship with other regions such as Europe (Portugal) and the CPLP. When our interviewees refer to ASEAN in international terms, the grouping is mainly seen as the country’s neighbor. However, a kinship terminology is used for the CPLP and Portugal: brother from abroad, younger brothers, brother who came back home to Timor-Leste.
Yet, when looking at the ethnographic data we presented, a multifaceted narrative seems to be predominant. On the surface, what is obvious is the translocal imagination of Europeans and the CPLP through an emotional proximity, through kinship terminology like that used in literature (Fox, 1989; Seixas, 2008; Sousa, 2010; Traube, 2011; Bovensiepen, 2015). Nevertheless, in a more in-depth examination of our approach, the situational function of the linguistic use of certain expressions such as “brothers” or “neighbors”, another interpretation can be made: it always depends on who is narrating the context of Timor-Leste, ASEAN and beyond, and what precisely is being referred to. In some cases, ASEAN is described as a neighbor “only”, in others it is described as of “the same kind” (through the link to Indonesia, for instance). What remains in the fore is that Timor-Leste could be the essential “gateway” for connecting ASEAN with the rest of the world: with Europe, with the CPLP, Australia, the Asia-Pacific region. Hence, it is important to understand this complexity through the dimension of space in a translocal approach. Translocal approaches can be seen as a contribution to understanding a multitude of phenomena which are connected to the (re)production of social constructions of “space”. These cover complexities such as internal-external movement, the building of identity, knowledge transfer and local development processes, which go beyond geographical-dichotomous conceptualizations: rural-urban, space-place, local-global, center-periphery (Hannerz, 1992; Appadurai, 1996; Agnew, 2005; Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013).

Therefore, when considering translocal imaginations on global interrelatedness, the building of international regions gains prominence. As we have pinpointed this realm through an amity and kinship context as strategies for coping with new times and new spaces, we propose that people's narratives have to be closely considered, in an attempt to comprehend state relations in interregional and international matters. As Kalir and Sur (2012, in Kalir, 2018, p. 350) frame it, using transitive concepts (such as the global ecumene in this case) can “sensitize us to alteration and movement rather than to fixity and preservation”, going on to add, “They pay heed to borders and boundaries precisely because they focus our gaze on their permissiveness and on the things that move across them”.

Hence, a translocality approach enables us to cope with ecumene imagination as a tool for understanding the role of movement within localities all over the world. It is actor-centered and sensitive to day-by-day interactions of localities and their agents, which enriches our mindset towards a modifying world of movements in ways which matter to the individuals who experience and create change, movement and mobility (Kalir, 2018, pp. 352–354). According to Kalier's perception of the importance of translocal approaches
for understanding new spaces in the making, the relevant role of bottom-up perspectives beyond geographical borders and barriers comes to light. Through this definition, territorial limitations can be overcome, and international regions can be built through translocal imaginations which may turn into a new object of study.

In its geostrategic interrelation with various regions in the world, ASEAN, as previously outlined, has been quite widely addressed in international relations and political sciences. However, it has been determined more as a locally fixed, regional phenomenon, understood through its economic and political clusters. What we propose in this chapter is that ASEAN (as well as other global regions) is more than just an economic-political construction in response to World War II and Cold War communism. Through the exploration of Timor-Leste's translocal imaginations and ecumene constructions, we understand that ASEAN is to be looked at as a global meeting place for important cultural exchange. This interpretation evolves out of the local narrative domain represented through myths of origin and inside-outside relations. Nevertheless, as we have tried to demonstrate, micro-constructions interact closely with the ‘macro’: translocal imaginations for coping with the world at large, linking the bureaucratic construction of nation-states beyond cognitive recognizable borders. There is, as has been widely focused on in anthropological transnationalism discourses (Hannerz, 1992; Escobar, 2001; Appadurai, 2003; Gottowik, 2010; Greiner, 2010; et al.), no such a thing as static, clearly distinguishable societies or regions. In our everyday faster moving, growing and interactive world, it is more relevant than ever to continue adding to an important area of reflection for clearly interwoven processes and dynamics between the global and the local.

Hence, when considering ASEAN as an area for meaningful cultural encounters, we propose that within a translocality discourse the concept of the ecumene serves as an essential tool. The global ecumene, as broadly discussed by Hannerz6 (1992), aims to deconstruct determinations of precisely such fixed territories, locations and attached to these, groups of people.

The ecumene, as understood through Hannerz’ definition (1992), is a projection of people's realities evolved from their translocal imaginations through which a new space within the world at large is created. Such projections are situational and take place in international-regional terms, as we have exemplified through Timor-Leste as a case study. Not least of which being emotional

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6 In a previous study (Lobner, 2020) we found three ideal types of ecumene: creolization (the Caribbean) (Mintz, 1996), amity (Lusotopy) (Pina-Cabral, 2010), global lineages (the Timorese space). These are based on the ecumene framework of Sidney Mintz, Ulf Hannerz, Pina-Cabral and our own research outputs.
proximity and kinship, which are metaphorically applied to regional contexts, serving to understand how people cope with the past, the present and, eventually, the building of the future.

As Hannerz tackles the global realm through reflection on international asymmetries which contribute to the meaning of cultural expression (Hannerz, 1992, p. 219), he moves back and forth on the center-periphery, global-local avenue. Cultural production, as he puts it, is an output of peripheral contextualization which responds to power structures established and produced within the center. He closely examines the interactions which are taking place within these alleged center-periphery distinctions, which are, as he defines them, a space of meaningful cultural exchange created from bottom-up. This is referred to as the ecumene, through which cultures and social interconnectedness can no longer be seen as distinct entities (Hannerz, 1992, p. 266). Even more so, such flows and translocal movements of imaginations go far beyond borders and create new interdependencies.

With this brief outline, we want to show that it is relevant to observe “the space between spaces”, understood under the building of different ecumene. This, as we proposed through Timor-Leste as a case study, is established through translocal imaginations on international regions, as they have been gaining more and more relevance in our field in recent years. As Kokot (2007, p. 20) puts it: “The ‘local’ is to be seen as a site where global processes are transformed into action or are constituted by practice”.

Hence, it can be understood that ASEAN is an ecumene that provides a ground of interaction and bonds based on emotions, feelings, imaginations, as a new space for the relationship between the local and the global. Through this conceptualization, the ecumene can be seen as a result of former disciplinary distinctions which we try to overcome in a world that is more connected than ever, beyond physical and material conditions. Within translocal debates, the fact that “social networks sharing cultural knowledge or generating cultural practice may not necessarily exist within the physical space at all” (Kokot, 2007, p. 17) comes to the fore. Humanity can no longer be separated into distinct areas – if this has ever been the case at all. Therefore, we propose to look at ASEAN as exactly such an intercultural meeting space: the link between several regional constructs which, up to now, have been understood as separate entities; this is something to be overcome in the 21st century of scientific, political and interpersonal discourses:

Everywhere we go, there are hints and connections to other cultures or “beings”, and to their interconnectedness. Humans are continuously in search of both similarities to and differences from ‘others’. We are in an
ongoing process of creating a greater context of belonging which goes beyond borders, using certain circumstances situationally and for specific purposes. Making a compromise seems inevitable when it comes to the construction and understanding of interconnectedness: ecumene projections contributing to the building of international regions.

Lobner, 2020, p. 31

We propose that the sociocultural dimension needs to be closely considered when trying to grasp global interrelatedness. The micro does not exist without the macro, for which reason we understand that state relations do not exist without people relations. Hence, if we want to understand ASEAN in its broader context, we must look at its role as an ecumene as one of great relevance. As Hannerz puts it, global influences are filtered at local level, where they are being transformed and incorporated into reality constructions, actions and the building of livelihoods: “The local level is the arena in which a variety of influences comes together, acted out perhaps in a unique combination, under those special conditions” (Hannerz, 1996, p. 27).

Finally, what we propose is that a comparative analysis of international relations and anthropology approaches for understanding international regions in the making (through different ecumene models) enables a translocal meeting zone in four dimensions: the local, the global, the interregional, the interstate.

6 Final Considerations

Throughout this chapter our aim was to contribute to the debate on globally interconnected meaning systems as they are reproduced through translocal imaginations on the ecumene. We proposed that ASEAN, as a regional organization, could be put into the framework of social reality constructions within the context of the world at large. For this debate, we first presented a literature review on how Southeast Asia as a region (ASEAN) is represented in scientific discourses in a bidimensional approach.

This consists, in our precise case, of international relations debates which mainly tackle the economic and political framework of the grouping, and secondly, sociocultural analyses which try to grasp inter-regional dynamics. Nevertheless, what we propose to be a very relevant dimension of local-global interconnectedness of regional organizations on the ground is still a relatively unexplored research avenue. Therefore, after our literature review on scientific discourses, we presented our case study of Timor-Leste through which our aim was to contribute to establishing this missing link between the local and the
global. Through Timor-Leste's translocal imaginations on ASEAN and beyond (through kinship, amity, cosmological and state narratives) we presented two sets of data reinforcing our proposal: i) data collected from the library and ii) data collected in the field.

Our focus was on how (translocal) imaginations from the bottom up construct a larger realm. Considering perceptions (and imaginations) as situational coping mechanism functions, we showed that reality constructions should be looked at as different paths of social organizations within globalization and transnationalism contexts. Putting this into the framework of geopolitical power discourses and the impact of global players, we found that ASEAN plays a relevant role for the international region context and has not, as far as we know, been analyzed previously through such a bottom-up approach. In conclusion, we add our findings to the debate on ASEAN as an international region of meaningful cultural exchange: the ecumene through translocal imaginations. Because “the local level is the arena in which a variety of influences come together, acted out perhaps in a unique combination, under those special conditions” (Hannerz, 1996, p. 27).

It is relevant to mention that our research path is an open one, with the purpose of contributing to a new avenue: the essential connection of international relations and anthropology discourses for coming closer to understanding the various meaning systems in play when debating contexts in the world at large. Within the anthropology of space, we propose that implementing such a bidimensional research dynamic using bottom-up and top-down mechanisms (micro/macro) in the construction of a new realm is an excellent contribution to expanding, negotiating and rethinking previous and current conceptualizations of global interconnectedness. As social scientists, we need to continue questioning the meanings behind a supposedly constructed world and its ongoing dynamics for reinventing realities. We suggest an ongoing and continuing dialogue on interactions as a whole in order to grasp the imaginations for the building of international regions.

References


