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Review Essays

Creating Timorese Futures

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Judith H. Bovensiepen (ed.), *The Promise of Prosperity: Visions of the Future in Timor-Leste*. Acton: Australian National University Press, 2018. xiv + 253 pp. ISBN: 9781760462529, price: USD 50.00 (paperback).

Andrey Damaledo, *Divided Loyalties: Displacement, Belonging and Citizenship among East Timorese in West Timor*. Acton: Australian National University Press, 2018. xxii + 204 pp. ISBN: 9781760462369, price: USD 50.00 (paperback).

There has been no lack of development studies of Timor-Leste during the last two decades. The possibilities and dilemmas facing the young insular republic have attracted the attention of a wide array of historians, anthropologists, economists, and political scientists. The two works under scrutiny nevertheless offer some innovative perspectives on the plight of the East Timorese. In spite of their different socio-geographical setting, they clearly have something in common: they study ideas, hopes, and visions of the future as conditioned by the (remote or near) past. As often stressed by students of *Geschichtsdidaktik*, historical consciousness links the experiences of the past with perspectives on the present and the anticipation of the future. Put another way, the idea of past and present cannot do without a future. As amply exemplified by the two books, this is valid for both modernist and traditionalist efforts to envision Timorese futures.

Having said that much, the scope of the two volumes differs markedly, and in fact they nicely complement each other. The edited volume by Judith Boven-

siepen, *The Promise of Prosperity*, contains twelve chapters that analyze mostly contemporary East Timorese perspectives of what the future may bring. Among the authors are found many of the more well-known names associated with East Timorese studies, mostly from Anglophone universities but also from Timor-Leste itself. Andrey Damaledo's *Divided Loyalties*, on the other hand, gives a much-needed perspective of the "losing" side, people who for a variety of reasons ended up in Indonesian West Timor and tried to create a future there. This opens up a discussion of the dilemmas of situating one's East Timorese-ness within the confines of the Indonesian nation state.

The edited volume, originating from a symposium in U.K. in 2016, appears in the wake of significant political developments in Timor-Leste, which have qualified some of the conclusions of the original papers, including a favorable agreement with Australia about the sea border and its oil and gas resources, and a new land law that might more efficiently protect property rights. Nevertheless, the various chapters nicely capture the hopes and frustrations of a "young" postcolonial nation with a very traumatic past. Not surprisingly, the prospects documented from various strata of East Timorese society are frequently associated with the country's resources in oil and gas. In fact, as pointed out by Judith Bovensiepen in her introduction, it is one of the most oil-dependent countries in the world, where 91 percent of direct or indirect state revenues depend on offshore oil and gas. While this is a key component in the promise of wealth envisioned since liberation, the rich finds in the Timor Sea may also be a resource curse. Experience has shown a cumbersome trend of rent-seeking and patrimonialism which have led to imbalances in oil-rich countries such as Nigeria and Sudan, though such a trend is far from unilinear. As Guteriano Neves points out in one chapter, Timor-Leste might be considered exemplary in terms of economic growth figures, with decreasing poverty rate and increasing Human Development Index—largely driven by oil incomes. However, this hides some uncomfortable facts, such as declining agriculture and concentration of the new middle class to urban areas, notably Dili. There are many reasons to rethink development and sustainability beyond oil.

Several contributors point out how grand plans have materialized over the heads of locals. A prime case is the special economic zone in Oecusse (ZEESM) which was inaugurated in 2014 and is discussed in chapters by Laura Yoder and Bernardo Almeida. Almeida points out how the need to obtain land for the infrastructure of ZEESM has led to expropriations where the state has proved unable to protect property rights. A small ray of hope is the new Land Law of 2017 that just might be able to amend the plight of smallholders.

A strength of the volume is that it is not limited to the materialistic side of development, but also gives ample room for alternative moral economics of prosperity. Thus Josh Trindade and Susana Barnes offer an anthropological

understanding, looking at the construction of the future as a cultural fact in the rural Babulu and urban Dili. This they do through the analysis of local concepts and the vision of inclusive society that they transmit. Similarly, Lisa Palmer contributes with a theoretically driven chapter based on Baucau experiences, that explores how Timorese cosmologies relate to materiality, the flow of life, and at length, hopes for a brighter future. Last but not least, Kelly Silva explores the Christian visions of the future in a country which has seen rapid Catholicization in modern times. Inevitably, Catholicism is confronted with the resurgence of “traditional” customs or *kultura*. Against this background, she identifies three distinct projects among clerical people, ranging between temporary acceptance of *kultura* for tactical reasons, endorsement of a steady coexistence between official religion and customs, and plain refusal to accommodate the two. The present encompassment of official religion by *kultura*, while widely criticized by clergymen, interestingly finds its parallels in other places, such as part of Melanesia, and may indicate that they are not necessary exclusive domains of action.

While the formidable socio-economic challenges facing Timor-Leste may give some of the chapters in *The Promise of Prosperity* a slightly pessimistic edge, the tone of Damaledo's book is somewhat brighter (as symbolized by the cover illustrations: in the former case a concrete mega-construction project in a dry landscape, in the latter a lively semi-traditional ceremony). Based on his experiences as Indonesian government official and later fieldwork, Damaledo discloses several strategies and ideological devices among East Timorese migrants to build a future on Indonesian soil. Media images in the West may have given these people bad press, as associated with the notorious ravages of pro-Indonesian militias in 1999. While not denying the violence committed by a lot of people, Damaledo demonstrates the variety of reasons for leaving Timor-Leste around 1999, from utilitarian to ideological. It is also commendable that he puts intra-island migration in a longer historical perspective. Colonial violence sent populations fleeing over the border between the Portuguese and Dutch spheres of interest from time to time, for example after the devastating Dom Boaventura rebellion in 1912. Today there are more than 88,000 migrants in West Timor, mostly staying in the Kupang area and Belu under frugal conditions. This is a sharp decrease since 2000, when 250,000 displaced East Timorese stayed in hundreds of camps. Most of the camp residents were later returned to Timor-Leste via a United Nations repatriation program, but many refused to return for a number of reasons. They are now often labelled as new citizens rather than refugees or ex-refugees.

The complications of identity formation tellingly appear from Damaledo's discussions with individual East Timorese. A person may denounce independent Timor-Leste on one occasion, only to express deep emotional attachment

to his or her native land on another. The dilemma of finding a future as loyal Indonesians while remaining East Timorese has been solved through a set of strategies identified by Damaledo. Complex ideas about land play a role. Tetun speakers settling in Belu sometimes claim to return to their ancestral land, since the former Belunese kingdom of Wehali is seen as the origin point of Timor, as the “mother and father” of the newcomers. Other ethnic groups like the Mambai and Idate, expand their origins to West Timor with symbolic devices, such as bringing with them ritual *lulik* objects and performing ancestral ceremonies on newly acquired land. Many migrants emphasize the sacrifices they have made for the sake of Indonesian integration, sacrifices which can take on a number of forms. In their understanding, sacrifice is related to reciprocity and must therefore be rewarded (a position similar to their old opponents, the Falintil veterans in Timor-Leste, studied by Kate Roll in a chapter in the edited volume by Bovensiepen). Sacrifice is also reconciliatory in nature and has the potential to reintegrate all East Timorese in a shared future project. Yet another strategy discussed by Damaledo is the activist one: political mobilization among the new citizens, whereby they contribute transforming the political landscape in Indonesia. Thus many East Timorese have engaged in Prabowo Subianto’s populist Gerindra party, Prabowo being seen as an old comrade-in-arms. The diverse participation in politics and associations has come to play a significant role in the social life of the Indonesian East Timorese. The book conveys a relatively sympathetic image of the strivings of the new citizens under resource-scarce conditions. One would have liked to hear more of the justifications of those implicated in the militia violence of 1999, though I realize that the sensitivity of the matter would make this problematic.

The two volumes under review are both well worth searching out, something that is facilitated by the fact that both are available in Open Access at the ANU website. In particular they should be lauded for their ambition to present a view from within, complementing studies built on more traditional social, economic, and political data. It is perhaps inevitable that the contributions in the edited volume by Bovensiepen vary much in tone and scope, from the macro-history of Timorese futures by Douglas Kammen, to Susana de Matos Viegas’s study of a minibus acquired by a family in Lautém, to Chris Shepherd’s very personal essay about his experiences of a solar-lamp project in Oecusse. The chapters range a lot in complexity, from Alex Grainger’s rather straightforward account of colonial oil prospects to Lisa Palmers complex discussion of Timorese cosmologies and concepts of landscape in relation to modern development practices. Some aspects of the anticipations of the future are largely missing, such as the hopes tied to impending membership in ASEAN, or the

acute threat from climate change. Damaledo's book, in particular, is stimulating reading even outside the immediate Timor or Indonesia fields. It provides a number of innovative perspectives on displacement, identity formation, and adaption to new settlement. A more nuanced understanding of the way that people conceptualize citizenship and national identity is significant in an age which is marked by migration streams as never before.