

Andrew McWilliam, *Post-conflict Social and Economic Recovery in Timor-Leste: Redemptive Legacies*. London and New York: Routledge [The Modern Anthropology of Southeast Asia 5], 2020, i–xvi + 165 pp, ISBN: 9780367366681, AUD 201.60 (hardback); 9780429347948, AUD 62.09 (ebook).

Andrew McWilliam worked as a development anthropologist for the Australian Aid Agency (AusAID) in West Timor (Indonesia) in the 1980s and 1990s. In the late 1990s he took a few trips to occupied East Timor (1975–1999) to monitor aid projects. At the time, he was one of the few outsiders to observe the intimidating military presence in Indonesia's "27th province". After East Timor's remarkable liberation in 1999, he embarked on two decades of frequent stints of fieldwork and contractual research activities, initially as the nation was under the United Nations Transitional Administration and then, from May 2002, as an independent country. In 2012, 2014, and 2017 McWilliam visited Europe and extended his investigation to Timorese unskilled (predominantly) work migration.

*Post-conflict Social and Economic Recovery in Timor-Leste* addresses the links between the experience of occupation, post-independence recovery, and migration. The ethnographic focus is on Lautem, the far eastern district inhabited by the Fataluku people. The book begins with the UN referendum majority vote for independence and its aftermath, when Indonesian withdrawal left a wake of destruction while East Timorese militia groups exacted gruesome revenge on pro-independence Timorese. McWilliam goes on to explore the rural people's response to the existential challenges they faced in a country devastated by a quarter century of conflict.

Without losing sight of East Timor as a whole, McWilliam identifies two strategies for understanding the "distinctive Fataluku response to the end of Indonesian occupation" and the "harsh realities of economic impoverishment ..." (p. 3). The first strategy was an inward-oriented "return to custom", which included the recovery of agriculture and livestock, the reinstatement of ceremonial and commensal exchanges with extended family, and sacrificial rituals to propitiate spirit ancestors. The impetus for this "re-energized focus on local traditions", McWilliam explains, lay not only in the absence of government services but also as a reaction to the repressive occupation years when customs were often restricted (e.g. group gatherings and access to ancestral lands) (pp. 3–4). For the most part, McWilliam's idea of "return to custom" amounts to the Timorese taking up where they left off; is this a strategy?

Yet, "compelling and equally significant" as well as "forward looking and outwards looking" was a second strategy, which saw younger Fataluku migrating to escape the 'depressing scenario' of life in Lautem with all its underpro-

ductive subsistence agriculture and lack of formal employment. In Dili, the capital, they sought to satisfy their “desire to engage and consume new expressions of modernity” (p. 5). McWilliam lingers briefly on the topic of national urban migration before launching into transnational labor migration, whereby increasing numbers of young people travel overseas on Portuguese passports (for which they have been eligible); transnational refers to “a process where migrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that engage both host and home societies”. These inward and outward strategies, McWilliam says, fold into each other, “becoming mutually constitutive and reinforcing” (p. 8). If we adopt McWilliam’s dual orientation frame—inward and outward—this appears to apply to practically everywhere we care to look in the so-called global South.

What comes next may be more peculiar to post-conflict societies. A primary driver of these strategies appears as what McWilliam calls redemptive legacies. These legacies are expressed in, and “redeemed through”, for example, “different forms of private and public recognition of the sacrifices made in the cause of [sic] national liberation” with all the religious connotations of redemption, which McWilliam explicates nicely (p. 9). With some justification, but insufficient clarity, McWilliam inserts transnational migration into the same, underlying spirit of redemption (albeit a more secular version of it), when East Timorese “rebuilt their shattered lives” by improving their lot overseas as well as providing assistance for their loved ones at home.

Chapter 2 is all about strategy one: the geography and ecology of Lautem; traditional ways of eking out a livelihood; recovery from liberation; and the return to custom which highlights the importance of animism and exchange in “life-cycle events” (especially marriage and death). This chapter serves as a baseline for understanding Fataluku culture in the ethnographic present, against which McWilliam pits the change presented in the rest of the book. Chapter 3 regresses to the horrors of the Indonesian invasion, war, and occupation. In the resistance that subsumes guerrilla warfare and the clandestine movement, the author locates the origins of the postcolonial migratory chain in the hundreds of student activists obtaining asylum in Portugal (via embassies in Jakarta) in the 1990s.

In chapter 4 McWilliam reaches across to Portugal and, particularly, to the UK, to account for the ever-increasing post-independence Timorese labour chain. Just how many Timorese are living in places like Oxford, Manchester and Dungannon (Northern Ireland), and how highly represented the Fataluku are among them, is more than enough to appreciate McWilliam’s own transnational research migration. We learn about Timorese support networks and social life (e.g. sport and gambling) in the broader context of social alienation

and, often, poor working conditions. Even so, most Timorese prosper economically. Chapter 5 then explores the connections between life abroad and life at home, underlining the import of communications (telephony and internet), mobility, remittances to family, returning home (for a visit or permanently) and falling in love. In chapter 6, McWilliam follows both remittances and people back to Lautem, documenting the dramatic transformations that result—albeit not uniformly—to housing, education and local entrepreneurship. As in other chapters, McWilliam inserts memorable vignettes to demonstrate the changing fortunes of his chosen subjects.

The concluding chapter substantiates the idea that the Fataluku are “customary moderns”. “Fataluku culture is not or is no longer reproduced simply or solely in the bounded localised spaces of Lautem and its constituent hamlets and villages, but is also carried and created anew in the mobile agency and relationships of young Fataluku migrant workers and aspiring students residing elsewhere” (p. 139). McWilliam goes on to cite several historical examples from the fifteenth to early twentieth centuries, to illustrate the customary-modernity of Fataluku ever since “frictional” interactions with external powers began. At this point, one may wonder why a chapter was not assigned to the Portuguese colonial period, especially since the origins of today’s transnational migration lie in Portuguese colonialism and the Cold War politics that allowed Indonesia to invade in the first place. Such a chapter would have allowed McWilliam to historicize animism as a set of practices greatly transformed through earlier colonialism and not simply repressed by occupation.

The book has a number of other detractions. McWilliam’s explanatory narratives rely heavily on an unacknowledged functionalist style. (McWilliam only mentions Durkheim in passing.) Functionalist statements relegate specific, concrete phenomena to higher, abstract, and generalizable tropes—like social or cultural reproduction. The formulaic quality of functionalism makes for dull interpretation, not least because it eschews questions of power. Apropos, it is astonishing how successfully McWilliam has circumvented the topic of development, given its prominence in the new nation; the notion of “redemptive legacies” as applied to overseas migration, however, can at times be read as a stand-in for development (redemptive) and underdevelopment (legacies). Far from any critique of development, what we see throughout McWilliam’s text is the steady infusion of developmentalist logics (e.g. livelihood strategies, underproductive agriculture, poverty, prosperity ...). The base assumptions and underlying optimism informing the narrative derive directly from development anthropology. Where is the dark side of progress?

McWilliam’s quasi-theoretical statements about the hybridity of customary and modern practices, traditional and cosmopolitan spaces, boundaries and

the collapse of boundaries, are as true as they are trite. Anthropology adopted the “essentialist critique” 30 years ago, but then it turned hybridity (and associated forms) into a mundane disciplinary identity. It is hard to detect originality in McWilliam’s musings about this binary; rather, we see hackneyed givens that cultures are not self-contained, bounded, static and so on, as if this were an argument. McWilliam cites Latour, and mentions strategies of purification and translation, but seems not to recognize their implications, much less entertain what an ostensible ‘amodern’ ethnography might look like. (For a start, it would be far more reflexive about how the ethnographer deploys his or her own categories.)

Although the chapters flow in an agreeable succession, there is too much repetition of assertions. Skin-crawling jargon, moreover, exceeds saturation point: “complex and varied”, “socially negotiated”, “new landscapes of circulation and flow”, “frictions between how things are remade as they travel as well as when they stay in one place, of reconfiguring the contrast between the past and local stability and the present/future global mobility exploring the generative qualities of their interconnection, the complexities of postmodern hyperspace ...” (see p. 8). Readers suffer at the hands of McWilliam’s long sentences and abstract noun phrases (over concrete nouns). Tendentious prose with adjectives spilling overboard is not helped by the relatively high frequency of poor grammar (e.g. sentences without verbs) and incorrect punctuation (e.g. commas in the strangest places).

Nevertheless, McWilliam has taken a great topic and the unfinished product has much to recommend it. In regards to empirical content at least, McWilliam has bestowed on Timor Studies an original and important contribution. His study of Fataluku at home and abroad, and the multiple crossings between these domains, redeem Timor anthropology’s legacy for its typical concentration on discrete ethnolinguistic groups in situ.

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