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PESKIZA FOUN KONA-BA
NOVAS INVESTIGAÇÕES SOBRE
NEW RESEARCH ON
PENELITIAN BARU TENTANG

TIMOR-LESTE

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NEVES, LI-LI CHEN, HANNAH LONEY AND MICHAEL LEACH.

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Current challenges for a decolonized Timor-Leste anthropology

Alberto Fidalgo Castro

Professional anthropological research in what is now Timor-Leste began before 2000, during the final years of Portuguese colonial rule. However, this progress was abruptly halted by the Indonesian occupation (1975-1999), during which anthropological studies were mostly conducted under strict supervision by the Indonesian state. Following the restoration of independence and the return of sovereignty in 2002, the country experienced an influx of anthropologists from around the world eager to conduct fieldwork in a nation that had been closed to foreign researchers for 24 years. As a result, the period after 2002 witnessed a significant increase in scholarly anthropological work, with many foreign researchers arriving to conduct fieldwork.

The historical connection between colonialism and the development of anthropology as an academic discipline has been well explored and analysed in critical studies (Asad, 1973). The colonial context played a crucial role in shaping the methods, objectives, and institutionalization of anthropology, especially following the postmodern turn in the discipline during the 1970s. Nonetheless Anthropology has a different perspective than many other related social sciences in that the discipline itself is based on the recognition of inherent value of plural ontologies and epistemologies, through cultural relativism and a long-standing stance against ethnocentrism. This, as the metaphor of a rope teach us, could be used (just as any scientific knowledge) for any purposes: a rope can be used to save a person from falling or could be used to kill somebody by hanging.

Criticism is always welcome, but I emphasize that much of anthropological knowledge production crumbles when decolonial approaches root themselves in the negation of universal knowledge. The same is the true when we they reject the possibility of mutual understanding among different alterities (Filho, 2024). It is because anthropology's aim is not only to study diversity among groups of people. It also deals with what makes us recognize each other's difference. Negating the possibility of a transcultural dialogue that is aimed to achieve a synthesis of multiple alterities (Gadamer, 2004), seems a very essentialist (and dangerous) position to me.

The intensified colonization efforts post the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, which mandated colonial powers to develop their overseas territories, triggered heightened conflicts with local populations. This shift in colonial orientation in Timor began during Governor Celestino da Silva's tenure, coinciding with a growing effort to understand the "other" under colonization. Scientific endeavours aimed at comprehending alterity emerged, seeking to benefit the Portuguese colonial enterprise. Notably, an early form of what we recognize as "professional" anthropology today took shape with the arrival of Rui Cinttati, alongside the establishment of French anthropological missions led by Louis Berthe, and the participation of Anglo-speaking researchers—such as David Hicks, Shepard Forman, Elizabeth Traube, and Toby Lazarowitz—a few years before the Indonesian invasion (Hicks, 2011).

Throughout the occupation, Indonesian-sponsored studies of local culture were widespread, significantly obstructing foreign research in Timor. Consequently, there was a noticeable shift towards investigations into Timorese culture, supported and funded by the Indonesian government. These studies often had the goal of romanticizing and commercializing local customs, indigenous knowledge, and social structures to align with the interests of the Indonesian state (Gusman et al., 1991; Hidayah et al., 1990; Saptomo et al., 1994; Satrosuwignyo et al., 1995; Susanto, 1995; Windiyarti et al., 1994). Many of these inquiries were utilized for propaganda, providing the Indonesian government with a means to justify its occupation (Gunter, 2007; McWilliam, 2005).

The result of hundreds of years of colonization is reflected in the studies carried out on local cultures has left deep-rooted legacies that influence knowledge systems, societal structures, and power dynamics. Overcoming these legacies to establish a decolonized anthropology requires addressing historical injustices and reorienting the discipline's foundations. For that, re-examinations (as it has

been done, for example, by authors such as Ricardo Roque) of previous works is of paramount importance. Even today, there is an important descriptive legacy of Timorese cultures to which researchers – anthropologists or other types of social researchers – are indebted due to the translations that colonial literature made of various elements of Timorese cultures (institutions, practices, local authorities, etc.). These translations and descriptions have a relevant influence on the present studies, since they show aspects and elements of Timorese culture in an essentialist way, without considering its dynamic aspects. This is the case, for instance, of terms such as *lulik*, *lia*, *na'in*, *dato*, *liurai* and so on. In the translation of these kind of terms we can find a European logic of relations is revealed under local concepts. I have spoken about these issues in other places (Fidalgo-Castro, 2012; Fidalgo-Castro & Alonso-Población, 2023a, 2023b), an effort that other authors have also been making (Tsuchiya, 2018b, 2019).

In light of this, the emergence of a decolonial Timorese Anthropology would be a transformative development. Rather than framing it as mere incorporation into the global anthropological discourse, it could be seen as the active participation of Timorese people in shaping the ongoing global conversation about their country. To illustrate this, consider the fact that between 2000 and 2024, over thirty doctoral theses with a significant anthropological focus have been produced on Timor-Leste (Babo-Soares, 2003; Barnes, 2016; Bexley, 2009; Boldoni, 2020; Bovensiepen, 2010; Burke, 2022; Close, 2016; Crespi, 2018; Crockford, 2007; Cryan, 2020; Cullen, 2016; Damaledo, 2016; Fernandes, 2020; Fidalgo-Castro, 2015; Field, 2004; Grainger, 2013; Hohe, 2004; Hunt, 2008; Manuel, 2012; Myrtilinen, 2010; Naidu, 2019; Nygaard-Christensen, 2010; Oliveira, 2008; Oviedo Ospina, 2019; Roque, 2007; Rose, 2017; K. C. da Silva, 2004; R. N. Da Silva, 2019; Simião, 2005; Sousa, n.d.; Thu, 2012; Tsuchiya, 2018a; Tusinski, 2015; Wilson, 2010; Yoder, 2005). I specifically chose doctoral theses as a measure of anthropological interest, given their basis in long-term research and often the support of dedicated research teams.² The volume of doctoral dissertations within such a condensed timeframe is rather remarkable in the field of Anthropology. The reopening of Timor-Leste post-occupation acted as a global rallying call, drawing widespread attention from international social science communities to this small Southeast Asian nation.

Out of all those theses, though, only one was conducted by a Timorese researcher: that of Dionisio Babo Soares. His anthropological contributions came to a halt after he became an active member of the National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (Portuguese: *Congresso Nacional de Reconstrução de Timor*, CNRT), a political party in which he served as Minister for the V, VI, and VIII Constitutional Governments.

Before the year 2000, there were several trained anthropologists, one of whom was the Jesuit priest Filomeno Simião Jacob Abel. He earned a doctorate in anthropology from the University of Oxford with a thesis focused on the island of Kisar (Abel, 1997). Filomeno Jacob was actively involved in the Government of the Constituent Assembly and also oversaw ecclesiastical affairs during this period. Additionally, there were other notable anthropologists who worked in the nineties such as Father Apolinário Maria Apparicio Guterres, a prolific author who published multiple texts about Timorese culture during that decade (A. M. A. Guterres, 1992, 1994; A. M. A. Guterres & Santos, 1990). Similarly, Justino Maria Aparicio Guterres (1997) also contributed to the field and both individuals held public positions in service of either the state or the Church.

Regarding the other significant contributions made by Timorese individuals (not anthropologically trained), notable works include those of Benjamin de Araújo e Côrte-Real (2003), a sociolinguist who has addressed topics related to Mambai oral literature; Vicente Paulino (2020), focusing on communication and culture; Josh Trinidad, exploring the hybridization of the social organization of the state and traditional society, as well as the concept of "lulik" as the core of Timorese cultural

² I have authored two papers (Fidalgo-Castro, 2022, 2023) in which I conducted a comprehensive analysis of the anthropological literature spanning the period 2000-2022.

values (Trinidad, 2012, 2016); Irta de Araújo, delving into the sacred aspects of Timorese midwives (I. S. B. de Araújo, 2013); and Valente de Araújo, examining the oral narratives concerning a production ritual (V. de Araújo, 2010).

The dynamic research landscape in Timor over the past two decades has predominantly been driven by foreign researchers, overshadowing the relatively limited scientific contributions from Timorese nationals. Consequently, the diverse interests and perspectives of the Timorese population have been underrepresented in the broader body of anthropological studies conducted in Timor-Leste, despite some foreign research projects intending to represent them within their varied scientific and applied objectives.

Addressing this disparity presents several challenges. First and foremost, it is essential to recognize the value of anthropological knowledge within the national context of Timor-Leste. Historically, urgent development needs in technical disciplines and health sciences, exemplified by collaborations with Cuba for human resource development, have tended to eclipse the pursuit of anthropological studies, rendering it a seemingly utopian endeavour until relatively recently.

So, the main question is: why is anthropology important for Timor-Leste? Geoffrey Gunn commented in a work shortly after independence that 'anthropology for anthropology's sake is still a luxury in an environment where policy-related work is at a premium' (Gunn, 2007, p. 107). This statement by Gunn, in reality, never ceases to be true. Thus, it becomes necessary to emphasize why anthropological knowledge can serve Timor-Leste. Its ability to offer a deep understanding of the cultural, social, and political complexities within the country provides a critical and reflective perspective on the traditions, beliefs, and community dynamics that are essential to the social fabric. This knowledge provides important perspectives for community development, the formulation of inclusive policies, and the promotion of intercultural respect. This has applications in countless fields of social intervention that help to improve the material conditions of existence of the local population. By understanding social structures and interactions in local contexts, anthropology can significantly contribute to conflict resolution, the promotion of social justice, and sustainable development in the country.

Currently, however, there is no public or private institution that offers anthropology education within Timor-Leste. I have been able to learn that there are plans within the National University Timor Lorosa'e to take the necessary steps to establish a postgraduate program in anthropology. This would be good news, but it also faces other problems. The first of them is the issue of faculty. We have seen how most of the anthropologists trained abroad have remained outside the academic world. Thus, those who could have started that initial seed of anthropological studies in the country, due to other urgencies of national reconstruction, have not been able to address this (such as, for example, Dionisio Babo Soares or Filomeno Jacob Abel).

The development of the curriculum stands as the main significant challenge. It requires designing a curriculum that is not only relevant to the cultural and social context of Timor-Leste but also integrates local perspectives and case studies while meeting global academic standards. This challenge involves finding a delicate balance between maintaining international academic standards and ensuring that the curriculum aligns with the specific needs and context of Timor-Leste. Also, it is necessary to think about the place that Timorese anthropology graduates would occupy in the local job market.

Here is where epistemological issues come more clearly into play. It is clear that overcoming the colonial legacies that have shaped knowledge production as well as the hegemony of Western epistemologies, recognizing the value of non-hegemonic knowledge systems (and local relevance) is important. However, this does not necessarily imply disregarding all Western knowledge as essentially negative, irrelevant, and something to fight against. Such an endeavour, as has been shown by Wilson Trajano Filho (2024), has repeatedly been presented as the ultimate goal by some decolonial theorists, which does not seem to have a very constructive end and does have a

conservative or even reactionary bias (Filho, 2024). As proposed by Professor Alcida Rita Ramos (2023), what is actually interesting is that the researched individuals also engage in research themselves and, mastering the academic codes of anthropology themselves. Ethnographies conducted by Timorese anthropologists about their own country (and also about other countries, including our own), would undoubtedly enrich the field of anthropological studies about their own country. In Ramos' words:

My bet is that the indigenous adhesion to anthropology will have the effect of transforming the discipline. Potentially it can dislodge it from its comfort zone, invite it to look at its own illusions, fallacies, and blind spots. Furthermore, it can reveal the inconvenience of confined academic life and the merits of the open field, the intellectual commons, in Mary Louise Pratt's felicitous expression (Ramos, 2023)

Undoubtedly, this would change what anthropology is today, towards something different that we do not yet see clearly. Having national anthropologists analysing their own country would certainly enrich the quality of the anthropological analysis of it; it will provide more nuanced and detailed ethnographies. But this must be done through the technical language of anthropology, ensuring the mutual understanding of the global scientific community. It is necessary to remember here that scientific knowledge, including anthropological knowledge, while having a very relevant and valuable applied aspect, also has a more global theoretical aspect, consisting of the advancement of science for a better understanding of the diversity of humanity. Ultimately, it is not just about thinking about what anthropology can contribute to Timor-Leste exclusively, but also about what Timor-Leste can contribute to global anthropology.

For years now, the anthropological discipline has been trying to move away from reifying people and their cultures. We no longer study 'The Fataluku' or 'the Mambai'. Now, as Tim Ingold says, we study specific problems with people (Ingold, 2018), we do not study people (we do not —or at least try not to— reify them). It is time for these individuals, who were until not long ago merely objects of study, especially within an anthropology rooted in colonial knowledge, to also study with us and help us improve the discipline.

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