

Book review: James Scambary: Conflict, Identity, and State Formation in East Timor 2000-2017

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JAMES SCAMBARY, *Conflict, Identity, and State Formation in East Timor 2000–2017*. Leiden: Brill, 2019. Xii, 252 pages, €105.00. ISBN 978-9004-39418-6

In April–May 2006, a major political crisis precipitated by a rift in the armed forces shook the newly independent nation of Timor-Leste. The Southeast Asian country had only regained independence four years earlier, after centuries of Portuguese colonial rule and 24 years of brutal Indonesian occupation. The fissures in the armed forces morphed into fighting between the police and the military, and soon simmering communal tensions broke out, in which various martial arts groups and other informal security groups (ISGs) played a key role. The crisis led to the displacement of over ten per cent of the country's population almost overnight, with 37 people killed and new international peacekeeping forces dispatched. Within a few short weeks, the country went from being a poster child of UN-led liberal peacebuilding to being an alleged basket case. Although much has been written about the 2006 crisis and its causes, comparatively few studies have examined the underlying local, rather than national, macro-level drivers or the nature and role of the various ISGs.

Conflict, Identity and State Formation in East Timor, by the late Australian anthropologist James Scambary, does just that, focusing on the “longstanding divisions and micro-conflicts obscured by the noise surrounding the UN statebuilding operation, but also the multiple networks of relationships and alliances that drive current configurations of political power and behaviour” (p. 209), as he puts it. Importantly, his analysis does not end with the “official” end of the crisis in 2006 but explores how violence continued in rural areas from 2006 to 2008 with over 150 deaths and long-term reverberations. The resultant book is a highly readable, multi-faceted and multi-level analysis of some of the drivers of the 2006 violence, but also a sobering account of how little has since been done to address these issues.

James Scambary, who passed away last year, was deeply invested emotionally and intellectually in Timor-Leste, having spent years working there in various capacities in civil society projects, as both a researcher and analyst. His embedded, grounded knowledge and willingness to go beyond dominant, simplistic and ahistorical explanations for the violence shines through in the book – as does his frustration with said master narratives. Unlike the common, somewhat reductive analyses of Timor-Leste's post-independence crises that focus on the UN and state level, Scambary dives deep into the local level. He examines the inter-linkages between urban and rural communities, as well as the overlapping influences of family and kinship ties, personal friendships and animosities, historical conflicts, political cleavages and the long shadows of Portuguese rule, the Indonesian occupation and their aftermath, all without getting caught up in endless complexity. He shows how these multiple local-

level tensions and cleavages can “jump scale” to the national level; how a drunken altercation at a wedding can escalate and become inter-woven with national politics.

The book is structured in nine chapters, most starting with an anecdotal vignette that draws the reader in. The first chapter lays out the basic argument of the book and how it positions itself against dominant narratives of the crisis. The second and third chapters give the reader an in-depth overview of the historical and socio-cultural context of the 2006 Crisis and of the various ISGs. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 examine the various groups in more detail and provide, in the sixth chapter, an account of how the conflicts and post-independence tensions played out in a particular squatter settlement in the capital, Dili. The seventh chapter then takes a critical look at peacebuilding efforts in Timor-Leste, while the penultimate chapter dissects the political system that has emerged in the country since independence, followed by a concluding chapter.

Much of the book thus portrays the various ISGs, which have also hitherto been under-researched academically. Scambary’s analysis goes against common but superficial explanations of the groups as consisting merely of manipulated, misguided and/or bored, delinquent, impoverished urban men. Instead, he paints a nuanced picture of the variety of ISGs, ranging from groups of local kids hanging around in the neighbourhood to millenarian veterans’ organisations challenging the state; from martial arts groups to criminal gangs. He explores their systems of meaning-making, their historical and social roots, their embeddedness in society (as well as politics) and their diverse membership. It is in these chapters – in which he traces the historical roots of the various groups, showcases their diversity and examines the localised dynamics of their activities – where his book is arguably at its best. Here is where his granular knowledge of the dynamics in the Bairro Pite neighbourhood of Dili, his grasp of the links between the urban squatters and their districts of origin, and his understanding of the personal backgrounds of key ISG leaders comes to its fullest. He also contrasts and compares the groups and their dynamics to others elsewhere, be it regionally to Indonesian or Filipino groups or the *raskols* in Papua New Guinea, or further abroad to Latin American groups. Rather than simply dismissing the ISGs as the spoilers, thugs and menaces that the media and public discourse have often portrayed them to be, Scambary’s portrayal of them is far more nuanced, though in no way uncritical or naïve about the violent and criminal potential of some of the people involved.

The full force of Scambary’s scathing criticism, however, comes to bear towards the end of the book, when he dissects national-level and internationally-funded efforts to understand and respond to the fall-out from the 2006 Crisis and the rise of ISG violence. He is withering in his assessment of the international community’s “macro-level and monocausal” analyses, the lack of an understanding of historical and social processes, and the short-termism of

peacebuilding and development efforts. The reader can viscerally feel his exasperation at the reluctance of external actors to engage with local knowledge and their preference for simpler, one-dimensional narratives of urban poverty, state failure, “youth bulges” and the like. “The local” thus either gets sidelined in favour of international models from elsewhere, or conversely becomes reified and romanticised as a cure-all, even when it does not fit. James Scamبارy is equally blistering in his critique of what he terms the neo-patrimonial, clientelist state that he believes the Timor-Leste political elites have built for themselves since independence. There is a distinct under-current of despondency in his narrative as he sketches the channels through which the resources of the country are misappropriated under the eyes of the regulators.

The main contributions of James Scamبارy’s book do not lie in anthropological or political science theory, nor in research methodologies. Rather, this is a book that I would hope (against hope) that external actors involved in peacebuilding and development would read, even if they do not engage with Timor-Leste. It compellingly makes the case for why a contextualised, nuanced, grounded analysis of conflicts is needed. As difficult as it is to explain this to donors, practitioners, journalists, analysts, researchers and others who prefer – or even demand – more straight-forward, simple narratives and dichotomies, trying to understand conflict requires engaging with inevitable and shifting complexities, contradictions and paradoxes. I also hope, with greater hope, that it will encourage more researchers to embrace their work and their subject matter with the same kind of warmth, empathy, dedication but also critical reflection that James Scamبارy did.

Henri Myrntinen

GUNNAR STANGE, *Postsecessionismus: Politische Transformation und Identitätspolitik in Aceh, Indonesien, nach dem Friedensabkommen von Helsinki (2005–2012)* [*Post-Secessionism: Political Transformation and Identity Politics in Aceh, Indonesia, after the Helsinki Peace Agreement (2005–2012)*]. Berlin: regiospectra Verlag, 2020. 352 pages, €33.90. ISBN 978-3-947729-32-6

Gunnar Stange’s monograph is a highly detailed account of a complex scene: post-conflict, post-disaster and post-secessionist Aceh. The book is divided into nine chapters that walk the reader through the twists and turns of political transformation of Aceh from 2005 to 2012, with rich ethnographic detail that strongly relies on interviews with high-ranking actors, for instance from the Free Aceh Movement or Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM), which would become the most important local political party.