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# Introduction: Political and spiritual visions of the future

Judith M. Bovensiepen

This edited volume is based on a symposium that took place at the University of Kent in April 2016, entitled ‘Visions of the Future in Timor-Leste’.<sup>1</sup> The aim was to bring together scholars from around the world who have been carrying out research in Timor-Leste for an open and critical discussion of current developments in the country. The enthusiasm and intensity of the debates we had during the symposium (fuelled by Josh Trindade’s essential supply of Letefoho coffee) eventually led to the production of this edited volume. Most of the articles were written in 2016 and revised in 2017.

During the final stages of preparing this manuscript for publication, political events in Timor-Leste unravelled at a breathless pace. The 2017 elections were followed by months of uncertainty, after the minority government led by Fretilin failed to get parliament to support its program

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1 The symposium was funded by a grant I received from the Economic and Social Research Council (grant no. ES/L010232/1), and by the University of Kent’s School of Anthropology and Conservation Small Grant Fund; I would like to thank both institutions for their generous support.

Not all the participants were able to contribute a chapter to this volume, and I would like to thank Mica Baretto Soares, Alberto Fidalgo Castro, Rui Graça Feijó, Henri Myrntinen and Maj Nygaard-Christensen for their participation, their enriching contributions to the discussion and fantastic feedback on everyone’s chapters. I would also like to thank Laura Burke, Morten Nygaard-Christensen and Prash Naidu for their participation as chairs and discussants, and for leading the final debate. Their input has been invaluable. Laura Burke deserves a special thank you for helping with organisational matters during the symposium, which enabled a smooth running of events.

I would also like to thank Emma August Welter, Emma Coupland and Beth Battrick for their excellent proofreading, and Douglas Kammen and Michael Leach for their last-minute input. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Viola Schreer, who has not just provided invaluable assistance during the preparation of the symposium and when putting together the manuscript, but whose own research on ‘visions of the future’ in Borneo has provided me with the most stimulating conversations and allowed me to clarify my own ideas and thoughts on the topic.

and 2017 budget. Parliament was dissolved and new elections were held in May 2018, which were won by the AMP (*Aliança de Maioria Parlamentar* [Parliamentary Majority Alliance]), a coalition of three parties, led by Xanana Gusmão (Leach 2018a). Even more relevant for this book were the groundbreaking developments regarding the disputed oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea. In March 2018, Gusmão successfully negotiated what, until recently, had seemed almost impossible: a permanent maritime boundary between Australia and Timor-Leste along the median line, and a resource-sharing agreement for the as-yet-untapped Greater Sunrise oil and gas fields, estimated to be worth more than US\$40 billion. The new maritime boundary places much of Greater Sunrise in East Timorese sovereign waters, which is roughly the equivalent to the country's 70 or 80 per cent revenue share (Leach 2018b).

While the contributions to this edited volume were finalised before these recent events took place, and hence do not discuss them in detail, the book, especially Part II ('State visions of development'), speaks directly to these turbulent political and economic developments. Recent events highlight the central importance of visions of the future, their relevance in informing policy decisions, and their ability to inspire unprecedented political change. Some of the chapters address the different social imaginaries that emerge from and are enabled by Timor-Leste's oil wealth, while others discuss how such grand visions are undercut and juxtaposed by localised techniques to achieve wellbeing and prosperity. At a time when important decisions about the country's future are being made, I hope that this book can act as a timely reminder that a great diversity of visions of prosperity coexist in Timor-Leste.<sup>2</sup>

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2 A note on terminology: between the start of the fieldwork that formed the groundwork for this book and the time of publication, the terminology used to refer to the administrative subdivisions of Timor-Leste changed. Where previously, the divisions of the nation were referred to as 'districts', further divided into 'subdistricts', the divisions are now termed 'municipalities', divided into 'administrative posts'. The district of Oecusse-Ambeno became a 'special administrative region'. I would like to thank Josh Trindade for drawing my attention to this. For the purposes of clarity and consistency, throughout this text we refer to all administrative divisions of Timor-Leste as 'districts', which are divided into 'subdistricts'.

## ‘From darkness into light’

In April 2015, representatives of Timor-Leste’s national oil company, TimorGap, travelled to Zumalai (in the Covalima district), in order to take part in a consultation with the local population about the planned construction of a highway. The 160-kilometre multi-lane all-weather highway is part of a planned mega petroleum infrastructure development scheme along the south coast, the Tasi Mane project, to be completed by 2020. The highway is intended to connect an oil refinery to be built in Betano to a supply base in Suai and a liquefied natural gas plant in Beaço. The charismatic subdistrict administrator (*chefe de posto*), who introduced the guests from the capital city Dili, was full of enthusiasm. The highway, and the Tasi Mane project in general, he argued, would lead Timor-Leste ‘out of darkness and into the light’ (*husi nakukun, ba naroman*, in Tetum).

Timor-Leste is one of the most oil-dependent countries in the world; in 2017, oil and gas contributed to 91 per cent of state revenues either directly (19 per cent) or via investments in the Petroleum Fund (72 per cent) (La’o Hamutuk 2018).<sup>3</sup> According to the non-governmental organisation La’o Hamutuk (2018), ‘only South Sudan, Libya (and [possibly] Equatorial Guinea ... ) are more dependent on oil and gas exports than Timor-Leste was’. From 1975 until 1999, the former Portuguese colony was occupied by the Indonesian military and was hence unable to govern its own resources. National independence, which was regained in 2002, generated promises of wealth and ambitious plans for national development. New and radical nationalist and hyper-modernist visions have emerged, which include plans for the said mega-development project to turn the entire south coast into a petroleum infrastructure, as well as plans for a special economic zone (ZEESM [*Zonas Especiais de Economia Social de Mercado de Timor-Leste*, or Special Economic Zone of Social Market Economy of Timor-Leste]) in the enclave of Oecusse that is later to be expanded to the island of Ataúro.<sup>4</sup> These schemes draw on familiar notions that the mobilisation of subterranean wealth may usher in radical societal transformation, while raising immense hopes about the change and development that such projects are expected to bring (see also Bovensiepen and Meitzner Yoder 2018). Yet these plans have also raised serious concerns among civil society groups about the social, economic

3 US\$1,295 million of investments from the Petroleum Fund remained unrealised (La’o Hamutuk 2018).

4 Please note that sometimes people use the term ZEEMS not ZEESM.

and environmental problems such mega-development schemes could produce (see also Bovensiepen and Nygaard-Christensen 2018). There are warnings, especially from within civil society circles, that Timor-Leste will be, or already is, subject to the ‘resource curse’ – an economic concept that was developed to explain why countries rich in resources tend to have slow economic growth, and why they tend to suffer from severe social problems such as corruption, violence and inequality (Auty 1993; Karl 1997; Ross 2011; Sachs and Warner 2001).

This edited volume brings together a diverse range of chapters that discuss national imaginaries inspired and enabled by oil wealth alongside non-state and non-oil-related visions of prosperity and development. The aim is to analyse disparate ideas about the future in Timor-Leste, acknowledging the significance of oil in shaping these visions, while also drawing attention to ways of imagining the future that are not inspired by oil. What kind of imaginaries are enabled by profits from oil wealth? How do the aspirations and hopes people have for the future shape the ways they govern their local and national resources? How are such hopes realised in practice? And how do people deal with conflicting visions of prosperity in times to come? These are just some of the questions that are addressed in this edited volume. Questions about the future are particularly relevant in Timor-Leste, where visions of independence, freedom and self-determination have been crucial in motivating the 24-year struggle for independence from Indonesia (1975–1999). The book sets its main focus on the era since regaining independence, contrasting state-level visions of the future with various religious, customary, ethical, economic and political ways in which the expectations and conceptualisations of the future motivate action in the present. By exploring how assumptions about the future influence the ways people lead their lives in the present, the book will address broader issues of governance, sustainability, customary renewal and human–environment relations.

In Timor-Leste, different temporal spheres and rhythms are frequently described through the idioms of darkness and light. Interestingly, these metaphors are evoked in starkly contrasting, and at times contradictory, ways. In some instances, metaphors of light are evoked to express modernist and teleological understandings of progress, where the dark is associated with a ‘primitive’ past, and the future is one of ‘civilised’ lightness and development (see Shepherd, Chapter 11; cf. Sneath 2009). Indonesian occupiers, for example, represented the Portuguese colonial past as one of darkness, and the present and future of their occupation as one of

progress and light (see Kammen, Chapter 1). Such modernist metaphors are challenged by narratives like that of the subdistrict administrator I mentioned earlier, who identified darkness not just with a period of Portuguese colonialism, but also included the period of the Indonesian occupation, while casting the era of national independence as one of light (see Bovensiepen, Chapter 6). The teleology of these two visions is inverted in the assumptions implicit in the concept of the ‘resource curse’, according to which the future is inevitably one of darkness, since oil wealth is seen to stifle progress, as well as produce conflict and authoritarian governance.

Accounts that identify light with progress are complicated by the common East Timorese identification of the world of the ancestors (and other invisible beings) with darkness, and the world of the living with light (Palmer, Chapter 10). According to this particular vision, even though the world of darkness is clearly seen as non-modern, it is not valued negatively, but is seen as a source of secret and invisible power that shapes the world of light (see also Traube 2017: 51). Metaphors of darkness and light are themes that run through several chapters of the book, and they reveal contrasting assumptions implicit in different visions of the future. These shifting ways of invoking darkness and light are expressions of East Timorese ‘historicity’ (Hirsch and Stewart 2005: 262) – that is, the diverse ways in which people’s orientation towards the present is informed by the way they make sense of the past while anticipating a specific future (see also Viegas, Chapter 9).

The book is divided into three parts. The first part, entitled ‘Looking at the future through the past’, examines historical projections of the future, focusing specifically on how external powers envisaged the future of eastern Timor at various historical junctures. Whereas Kammen (Chapter 1) teases out the disparate visions of progress that motivated Portuguese, Indonesian and United Nations visions for the future and shaped the ways in which these powers legitimated their presence in the country, Grainger (Chapter 2) focuses on the history of the Timor Oil Company (1956–1968), showing how prospects for oil in Portuguese Timor were not necessarily driven by economic, but rather by political concerns.

These critical examinations of how visions of the future are entrenched with particular forms of governance provide an essential background to the second part of the book, which concentrates on ‘State visions of development’. Neves (Chapter 3) tackles the issue of oil dependency

head-on, illustrating how the independent state's vision of the future cannot be divorced from its rapidly growing dependence on resource rents, and discussing to what extent independent Timor-Leste has become a rentier economy. The implications of this dependency are examined in the chapters by Meitzner Yoder (Chapter 4), Almeida (Chapter 5) and Bovensiepen (Chapter 6), who analyse different social, legal and political challenges of the government's current mega-development projects in the regions of Oecusse and along the south coast of Timor-Leste. In this context, the generous veteran benefits scheme, enabled by money from the Petroleum Fund, and analysed by Roll (Chapter 7), might be interpreted as a first symptom of the resource curse becoming reality.

These national imaginaries of change find both points of connection and disconnection with the localised hopes for prosperity and wellbeing. These are examined in the third part of the book, which focuses on non-state visions of the future and the moral economies in which such visions are embedded. Trindade and Barnes (Chapter 8), Viegas (Chapter 9) and Palmer (Chapter 10) concentrate on how ordinary people living in rural and urban areas of Timor-Leste imagine a prosperous future and good life, exploring the various ritual and social practices that are employed to realise these imaginaries. Both Palmer (Chapter 10) and Shepherd (Chapter 11) illustrate how ideas about progress, development and prosperity can generate conflict and tension between local and national actors, and Shepherd shows how the need to foreground successful development paths can lead to a suppression of less desirable realities. Finally, Silva (Chapter 12) expands our understanding of local desires for life improvement by discussing the crucially important perspective of the Catholic Church, examining diverse understandings by Catholic priests of how improved moral, social and religious conduct can be achieved in the future, by transforming the relationship between culture and religion. The afterword draws out two recurring and overlapping thematic contrasts between (1) regulatory power and ritual authority, and (2) a related distinction around the luminous qualities of lightness and darkness applied to specific knowledge domains and fields of action.

The remainder of this introduction sketches out how the book contributes to several key themes. First, I will briefly discuss the concept of the 'resource curse', and outline how the book both builds on and departs from this particular understanding of how oil dependency can shape a country's future trajectory. Second, I will discuss how the book draws on anthropological approaches to the future, hope and anticipation, focusing

particularly on how future visions inform political agency. And the third main theme to be discussed concerns the ways in which the spiritual significance of the environment and of natural resources influence the political relations implicated in their management. This dual emphasis on spiritual and political ecologies runs throughout the book, which draws attention to the intersection of material and immaterial desires and aspirations.

## The resource curse and beyond

Speaking to political scientist Terry Karl, the Venezuelan diplomat Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonzo said: ‘Ten years from now, twenty years from now, you will see. Oil will bring us ruin’ (Karl 1997: xv). This was the starting point of Karl’s book, *The paradox of plenty*, which was one of the key works that contributed to developing the economic theory that came to be known as the ‘resource curse’. The term was developed to explain why countries rich in natural resources, instead of experiencing prosperity and rapid development, frequently suffered from economic stagnation, violent conflict, corruption and authoritarianism.

Economists first diagnosed the contradictory effects of resource wealth in the form of the ‘Dutch disease’ – a term that was coined to explain why productivity in some economic sectors declined (in the case of the Netherlands, manufacturing) when large quantities of natural resources were found (Gelb 1998).<sup>5</sup> As Reyna and Behrends (2008: 6) argue, ‘Oil is a particular resource, so oil’s curse is a specific instance of the Dutch Disease in petroleum-based resource booms’. Whereas Dutch disease describes how natural resource sectors experience a boom at the expense of other economic domains, the resource curse is used to describe not just economic stagnation, but also political conflict, violence and instability that arise (e.g. Klare 2002). The literature on the resource curse is vast (see, for example, Auty 1993; Karl 1997; Ross 2011; Sachs and Warner 2001; Watts 2001), and cannot be summarised here in detail. However, let me briefly outline the explanations provided for the contradictory effects of resource wealth, and the critiques of the ‘resource curse’ literature that are relevant to this volume.

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5 Dutch disease results from a large influx of foreign currency, which Timor-Leste managed to avoid by adopting the US dollar as a currency (Scheiner 2015: 9).



According to Reyna and Behrends (2008), two main political science approaches have been influential in explaining the curse of oil: first, rent-seeking, and second, patrimonialism. The issue of rent-seeking was already emphasised by classical economists in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, including Adam Smith, who warned of the ‘perils of natural resource rents’ (ibid.: 5), because making a profit from natural resources discourages productive activity. In oil economies, rents are royalties that are accrued through oil sales and this is thought to create ‘petro-states’, where small elites who benefit from these super-profits are the main holders of power. In these economies, profit is made not through trade or productive enterprise, but by manipulating the political and economic environment and rent-seeking (Krueger 1974). This has concrete institutional effects, argues Karl (1997), as it incentivises entrepreneurs to manipulate state officials and intervene in the market in order to accrue oil profits. The effect is that the profits from a country’s wealth are channelled to the elites, rather than to ‘those engaged in less remunerative but more productive activities’ (Karl 1997: 57). As Reyna and Behrends (2008: 6) argue, ‘Oil ministries and companies become institutions that distribute oil rents’. Natural resource wealth, according to Karl’s (1997: 15) seminal text *The Paradox of Plenty*, creates certain institutional arrangements that encourage public authorities and private interests to engage in rent-seeking; these arrangements then constrain choices later on (see also Neves, Chapter 3).

Patrimonial political structures are another explanation for the resource curse. Following Weber’s (1978, cited in Reyna and Behrends 2008: 7) analysis of ancient and medieval politics, we speak of patrimonialism when a kin group treats the state as a form of private property. Neopatrimonialism is a term used to explain the challenges of development in parts of postcolonial Africa (Médard 1991, cited in Reyna and Behrends, 2008: 7), where public authorities and government roles are populated by members of the same ascendancy. Officials in public institutions use public assets in order to ‘maintain or create loyalty among their rent-seeking clients, kin or friends. Oil rents are public assets’ (Reyna and Behrends 2008: 7). This gives rise to an entirely new scale of corruption, bad public services and the potential for violence and conflict.

Although the concept of the resource curse has also been criticised in its own terms (see Alexeev and Conrad 2009, cited in Rogers 2015: 367), there is also a recognition that resource wealth does not have the same effect in all countries, in other words that ‘sometimes economic development is hampered by the curse and sometimes it is not’ (Reyna and Behrends

2008: 6). This is one of the arguments made by some anthropologists who have been critical of the ‘unilinear teleology of the resource curse theory (and of “development” more generally)’ (Gilberthorpe and Rajak 2016: 4). Rogers (2015: 374) argues that anthropological studies of resource economies have shown that the political, economic and environmental effects of oil production and consumption are not predictable.

However, challenging the unilinear trajectory of resource curse theorists does not mean that there are no patterns in the ways that countries are affected by oil wealth. African countries, such as Nigeria, Chad or Sudan, are often seen to be ‘more cursed’ than, say, Mexico, Brazil or Venezuela, while countries like Norway are widely considered to have escaped the resource curse (Reyna and Behrends 2008: 11). John Gledhill (2008) further explores this point in his comparative analysis of Mexico, Venezuela and Brazil. He argues that Latin American populist politics, which fostered a sense of resource nationalism through the imaginary of ‘the people’s oil’ (ibid.: 59), not only put oil at the centre of popular imaginaries (ibid.: 58), but also managed to keep the privatisation of public assets at bay. This meant that Latin American business elites did not manage to be as influential as they were in, say, East Asia, since privatisers are seen ‘as alienating what should be public goods in their personal interest as well as “selling the patrimony of the nation” to foreign interests’ (ibid.: 59). Hence, the management of resource wealth must be understood in the specific context of Latin American history that was shaped by popular struggles for greater social justice (see also Bovensiepen, Chapter 6).

Anthropologists and other social scientists studying resource-rich countries have emphasised the vast diversity of historical trajectories. They have criticised political economy approaches that interpret the development of resource-rich countries merely in terms of the resource curse as risking to erase the cultural and historical specificity of a place. As Rogers (2015: 371) has argued:

One of the most effective critiques of the resource curse strand of scholarship on oil in social science is that it is incapable of seeing oil as anything other than oil money, as state revenues that can be evaluated by outside experts for how prudently they are spent.

This is why, according to Gilberthorpe and Rajak (2016: 8), there is a need to ‘re-embed’ examinations of resource wealth within the social and historical relations that enable resource extraction. Anthropologists have done this, for example, by examining how resource wealth has

the ability to reconfigure state–society relations (e.g. Mitchell 2011) and how it can lead to an absent or ‘hollowed out’ state (Bridge 2010). They have also investigated how resource extraction can produce ‘spatial enclaving’ (Appel 2012; Ferguson 2005), or how companies can take on roles usually expected to be carried out by the state (Kirsch 2014; Rajak 2011). There has also been an emphasis on the performative effect of the very concept of the ‘resource curse’; for example, in Weszkalnys’ (2008) examination of how the expectation of disaster through possible future resource dependency has shaped the political and social reality in São Tomé and Príncipe.<sup>6</sup>

In Timor-Leste, arguments about the risks and dangers of resource dependency have also gained traction in recent years. Charles Scheiner (2014, 2015, 2017), who is a researcher at La’o Hamutuk, the Timor-Leste Institute for Development Monitoring and Analysis, has outlined in detail why Timor-Leste is at risk of becoming subject to the resource curse. First of all, oil is a significant part of Timor-Leste’s gross domestic product (GDP) (76.4 per cent in 2013), while the non-oil GDP is largely derived from spending oil money on public administration, infrastructure and government goods and services. Between 2007 and 2013, the productive parts of the economy (agriculture and manufacturing) shrank by 13 per cent (Scheiner 2015: 2). Second, Scheiner (2014, 2015) stresses, the state budget is strongly dependent on money from oil and gas. In 2014, oil and gas provided more than 93 per cent of state revenues (either directly or through previous investment). Taxes were reduced in order to attract foreign investment, which means that the country now has ‘the third lowest total tax rate in the world’ (Scheiner 2015: 4).

The 2016 and 2017 state budgets maintained similar levels of dependency on income from oil and gas, exceeding spending from Timor-Leste’s Petroleum Fund that would be considered to be sustainable (La’o Hamutuk 2016). This reliance on income from oil and gas, and the heavy investment in public administration and infrastructure, is problematic because other sectors of the economy, such as agriculture, are not developed in the same way. With different interest groups, such as veterans, making claims to public funds, and investment concentrated on mega infrastructure projects, Scheiner (2014) concludes that there is an urgent need to take action towards more sustainable and equitable development that would

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6 For overview articles on the resource curse from an anthropological angle, see e.g. Gilberthorpe and Rajak (2016), Reyna and Behrends (2008) and Rogers (2015).

include the increase of food production, the cancellation of wasteful spending and of current megaprojects, as well as investing in education, nutrition and health. Scheiner (2015: 10) argues that geographic and historical factors make Timor-Leste acutely vulnerable to the negative impacts of the resource curse.

Like Scheiner, who worries Timor-Leste's future is one that will be shaped by the curse of oil, James Scambary (2015) has argued that symptoms that typically characterise the resource curse can already be identified in Timor-Leste. He states that funds from petroleum wealth have encouraged and supported the development of neopatrimonialist and clientelist political networks, connected to descent-based social organisation, affiliations from clandestine networks that were established during the resistance against Indonesian occupation, and the remnants of the command-style resistance structure. These political affiliations have been mobilised to sideline due bureaucratic process (despite the existence of Weberian sociolegal institutions), especially with regards to the construction industry. This has given rise to corruption, as well as ineffective infrastructural provisions. Like Scheiner, Scambary maintains that current megaprojects and dwindling oil and gas resources will only exacerbate existing inequalities. In this volume, Neves (Chapter 3) develops this approach by illustrating how the rent-seeking behaviour of East Timorese elites is shaping the state, its structure, policies and institutions.

This volume provides a critical comparative examination of state visions of development in Timor-Leste, including an examination of how the availability of large sums from the Petroleum Fund has given rise to plans for massive infrastructure development. We discuss the legal basis of the government's land acquisition (Almeida, Chapter 5); the ways in which government actors appropriate local and national political narratives in the planning and implementation of the ZEESM (Meitzner Yoder, Chapter 4); how ideas of sovereignty and resistance are mobilised in the implementation of the Tasi Mane project in Suai (Bovensiepen, Chapter 6); how oil money is used to fund a large-scale veteran benefits scheme (Roll, Chapter 7); and how oil rents have shaped the nature of the post-conflict state institutions in Timor-Leste (Neves, Chapter 3).

The use of oil rents for mega-development projects in Timor-Leste has been heavily criticised by civil society groups and researchers in recent years. Cryan (2015) has stressed, among others, the dangers of land loss along the south coast, where the petroleum infrastructure project is to

be built. For subsistence farmers, losing land without viable alternatives could lead to impoverishment, social problems, joblessness and social tensions (see also Bovensiepen, Chapter 6). Laura Meitzner Yoder (2015) has criticised the top-down nature of the plans to turn the enclave of Oecusse into a special economic zone (ZEESM), and she interprets the plans along the lines of Scott's (1998) critique of state-initiated, utopian social engineering projects. She argues that ZEESM, with its initial plans for a hotel, an international university and an international hospital, was designed to cater for outsiders, rather than to improve local lives.

Given the critiques of the concept of the resource curse by anthropologists on the one hand, and these critical assessments of the current political and economic situation of Timor-Leste on the other, how useful is it to speak of the 'resource curse' in Timor-Leste? While Rogers (2015: 371) clearly has a point in stressing that an uncritical universal application of the concept of the resource curse risks reducing all aspects of people's lifeworlds to particular economic principles, I would not go as far as saying that there is not an element of predictability in the trajectory of oil-rich nations. Even if resource wealth creates different effects in different countries, there is still overwhelming evidence that oil wealth tends to stifle development, produce political instability, foster corruption and clientelism, and hamper the development of a diversified economy. The effects might be different in different countries, depending on their particular social context or postcolonial histories, and perhaps the longevity of their democratic institutions; however, this is not to say that the resource curse is merely an 'economic discourse' without a concrete social reality.

Nevertheless, this volume seeks to go beyond the vision of the resource curse to examine ideas about the future. It takes the political realities of Timor-Leste's increasing oil dependency and the social problems this produces seriously, while examining this particular analysis alongside a range of other ideas about how future prosperity might be achieved.

## Future orientations

Until quite recently, there was relatively little interest in anthropology in studying the future. Persoon and van Est (2000: 7) have contrasted anthropologists' reluctance to study the future with the attitude of environmental scientists and planners who are, as they say, 'obsessed with

the future', since 'scenarios and models based on visions of coming times are their primary analytical instruments'. However, the authors have also emphasised that the future has been implicit in many of the topics that anthropologists have examined, such as attempts to manipulate the future through divination and sacrifice or the way people anticipate the future in the maintenance of material culture (Persoon and van Est 2000: 11).

Viegas (Chapter 9) illustrates this in her examination of how a resident of Lautém mobilises the blessing of the ancestors through divination in order to generate a prosperous future for his business venture. Similarly, Trindade and Barnes (Chapter 8) describe a range of metaphors that some East Timorese evoke and practices they initiate to achieve 'good life' and prosperity for themselves and for future generations. Trindade and Barnes draw on Appadurai's (2013: 5) argument that the future is a 'cultural artefact' and his emphasis on the need to 're-orientate anthropological inquiries into understanding how humans construct their cultural futures'. This book makes a specific contribution to this approach. The first two parts of the book (in addition to Shepherd's analysis in Chapter 11) are dominated largely by an examination of more unilinear views of state planners and development practitioners who tend to think about the future in terms of progress, plans, goals and targets (see Appadurai 2013). The third part examines the role of customary practices, and ancestral and religious values in shaping ideas about the future.

Sandra Wallman, one of the first scholars who tried to develop the future as an analytical concept in anthropology, states that anthropologists have neglected the topic of the future because of their hesitation to make 'predictions' (1992: 2). Wallman's argument is that, rather than trying to predict the future, anthropologists should try to interpret how ideas about the future affect what people do in the present. She maintains that images of the future shape the present at least as much as images of the past do (ibid.: 2; cf. Hirsch and Stewart 2005: 262). 'The future has political as well as analytical consequences. Assumptions about it govern the management of resources at every level – domestic, national and global' (Wallman 1992: 3). Wallman's approach to studying 'contemporary futures' (the title of her book) allows her to bridge the widespread opposition between unilinear and non-unilinear understandings of the future. Thinking about the future as a forward-looking orientation in the present has given rise to a whole range of different anthropological studies that examine how

practices of anticipating, imagining or dreaming about times to come can shape everyday life (see, for example, Cross 2014; Gardner et al. 2014; Schielke 2015; Wieszkalnys 2008, 2014).

Cast as invoking ‘an ever-further horizon’ (Crapanzano 2004: 104) or as a way of reorienting knowledge (Miyazaki 2004), some consider ‘hope’ to be a key sentiment that can shape future orientations in the present. Hope for a more prosperous life in the future, a sentiment that connects different temporal spheres, is a theme that runs through this book. Viegas (Chapter 9), for example, explores how hopes for a successful business venture are fuelled by mobilising ties of the past (clandestine networks from the resistance and ancestral connections) in order to produce specific outcomes of prosperity in the future. Paying attention to the ways in which hope expresses a future orientation in the present helps us to avoid interpretations, which posit history as progressing along linear lines with a clear-cut end point (see Miyazaki 2004: 15; Crapanzano 2004: 2). Hope orients knowledge, without closing off future possibilities.

By making visible the diversity of ideas about the future that coexist in different domains of life in Timor-Leste, the chapters in this book, taken together, bring out the indeterminacy of developments in Timor-Leste and defy the idea that things will necessarily progress in a specific direction – either following the course of resource doom or bringing about an *el dorado* of resource abundance. However, as Part II of this book shows, hopes for prosperity may also reinforce teleological visions. In Chapter 11, Shepherd examines how evaluators in the development industry conceal the ambiguities of data they collect during the evaluation process (the ‘shadows’, as he calls them) in order to highlight the success of the institutions they evaluate. This insight has broader application. Modernist narratives of prosperity might not replace local visions entirely, but the large-scale reach of national development plans may well lead to a back-staging of alternative moral economies of reciprocity, while foregrounding capitalist notions of progress and wellbeing.

Social and economic conditions shape the ways people perceive their own political agency (Sanchez 2018), and, in Timor-Leste, people’s historic participation in the resistance struggle against Indonesia and memories of this time influence how they hope for change. It is often when a situation is particularly dire (and hence seems hopeless) that hope is reinvigorated (see also Crapanzano 2004: 114; Pelkmans 2013; Schreer 2016). Part II of the book illustrates that people can be hopeful, even when they do not feel that they have control over the events that shape their livelihoods. This is

visible in the responses to current megaprojects by ‘affected community’ members in Oecusse and Suai, who argue that ‘whether they like it or not’ they have to accept the government’s plans and resettlement programs (see Almeida, Chapter 5; Bovensiepen, Chapter 6).

The passive hope of residents living in megaproject development zones is contrasted by the more active hope implicit in techniques to achieve prosperity through purposeful ethical action.<sup>7</sup> Kelly Silva, in Chapter 12, explores how ideas about future improvement are directed towards the self, by examining how Catholic priests reflect on the appropriate relationship between the Catholic faith and existing cultural practices. Trindade and Barnes (Chapter 8), as well as Viegas (Chapter 9) and Palmer (Chapter 10), describe how people tap into the ancestral realm to realise the promise of prosperity. Unlike evangelical and neoliberal ideologies that evacuate the ‘near future’ (Guyer 2007: 414), rural communities in Timor-Leste direct hope towards the ancestors (located, one might say, simultaneously in the distant future and in the distant past), in order to gain benefits for themselves and their relatives in the near future.

However, since the ancestors are ‘considered the living dead in the present’ (Persoon and van Est 2000: 11), locating prosperity in the ancestral realm does not just involve looking ‘back’, it also involves turning to ancestral manifestations in the inhabited environment. This is why, in many local idioms and practices, looking after the environment is a way of bringing about a prosperous future. Let us explore this in more detail in the last section.

## Spiritual and political ecologies

Examining the interface between religion and ecology, Lisa Palmer (2015: 8) has argued (following Sponsel 2010) that in Timor-Leste the relationship between people and their environment might best be understood through the term ‘spiritual ecologies’. This term refers to the localised ritual interpretations of the environment and the role of spiritual agents within it, allowing her to examine how such perceptions

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7 Many studies of hope make a distinction between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ hope. According to Zigon (2009: 254), a more meaningful distinction is between hope as ‘the background attitude that sustains an already accomplished social life’ and ‘the temporal orientation of intentional ethical action in ... moments of ... moral breakdown’.



affect people's engagement with the world and management of resources that surround them. Quite crucially, Palmer uses the term in the plural, showing that there are different, and at times competing, logics at play, and illustrating how there can be frictions between different ways of engaging with the environment. However, rather than merely concentrating on the different ontological assumptions implicit in competing ecologies, Palmer (2015: 21–23) strives to open her analysis up to political implications of these different spiritual ecologies, and to their ongoing transformation. In other words, she draws attention to the way customary practices can be deeply political (see also Bovensiepen 2015).

The approach outlined by Palmer is a good starting point for the diverse chapters in this edited volume, which pay attention to the ways in which future visions are embodied in people's spiritual and political relations with the environment. The significance of the land and its resources in shaping the ways in which different East Timorese groups identify and how they manage relations among themselves cannot be overstated (see, for example, Bovensiepen 2015; Friedberg 2007; McWilliam and Traube 2011; Palmer 2015; Palmer and de Carvalho 2008; Shepherd 2013; Trindade 2012).<sup>8</sup> Even though there is great regional diversity, it is possible to identify some characteristic patterns that mark the relationship between people and place in Timor-Leste. First of all, the landscape is widely considered to be inhabited not just by humans, but by a whole range of non-human or invisible beings, such as spirits and ancestors. Second, human beings are often seen as being in debt to this non-human world, and prosperity and wellbeing can only be achieved by continually repaying these obligations. Finally, the inhabited environment in Timor-Leste is closely connected to human perceptions of time. This final point is most significant for this book (especially Part III), since local visions of the future can be discerned in several cases by examining the temporality of the landscape.

First, about the cohabitation of human and non-human beings. One of the recurring themes in many of the accounts about human origins in Timor-Leste is the suggestion that the first human ancestors emerged from a specific site in the landscape, such as a stone, a mountain, a field or a piece of forest. These accounts are often secret and only revealed during specific ritual occasions. There is a subtle awareness that these accounts

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8 The connection between place and identity is of course also an important theme in the anthropology of Eastern Indonesia (see e.g. Allerton 2009; Fox 2006; Vischer 2009).

could enter into tension with biblical accounts about human origins. These poly-ontological (one might even say totemic) accounts (which posit multiple independent origins of human groups in the landscape) are often hidden and subjugated to mono-ontological accounts (which posit a single origin of humanity, usually at a ‘navel’ place in Timor-Leste), which are more easily integrated into biblical narratives (cf. Scott 2007).

Places that have an ancestral connection tend to be described as sacred or potent (*lulik*, or its regional variants), and they have to be treated with respect either by being avoided or by being approached in a ritually appropriate manner only. The power of the ancestors is also visible in *lulik* houses (also referred to as customary houses – *uma lisan*), in which objects handed down from the ancestors are stored. These houses stand for entire groups of people and contain multiple smaller houses or subgroups. It is in ancestral *lulik* houses that ancestors maintain a presence that can shape the everyday lives of the people who look after these houses and their broader patrilineal or matrilineal kin group.

In addition to the ancestral presence in the landscape and in the built environment, there are other spiritual agents that inhabit the environment, such as land or water spirits. These spirits are considered to be guardians or ‘custodians’ (Palmer 2015: 49) of specific sites or places. They tend to appear in uninhabited places and can be seen as threatening to human beings (Bovensiepen 2009). There are accounts of other non-human beings that are considered to inhabit the environment, such as witches, wild, gnome-like beings (*dore fuik*) or kidnapper-thieves, referred to *ninjas* or *lakahonik* in Tetum (ibid.).

Notions of debt and reciprocity are key to understanding the relationship between humans and the inhabited environment (see Bovensiepen 2015; Hicks 2004; McWilliam 2001; McWilliam et al. 2014; Palmer 2015; McWilliam and Traube 2011). *Lulik* places, such as springs, rocks, hilltops or forests, are often considered to have a life-giving quality and hence require small offerings in order to mobilise this quality. Sometimes *lulik* places are marked out with a small fence around stones and people know to avoid these sites. Several language groups in Timor-Leste have ‘totem poles’, whose split V-shape points into the sky, connecting humans to the spiritual universe (Trindade 2015). Rituals to produce rain, or to mobilise the life-giving quality of springs or fields, are frequently carried out at these sites. The rituals to mobilise the life-giving properties of the environment echo exchanges between life-giving and life-taking groups,

where the 'wife-givers' need to be compensated through a range of different gifts by the 'wife-takers' (in patrilineal areas). There are also small rituals that involve making offerings to ancestral *lulik* places in order to gain good health, fertility and prosperity, and to attain a good and prosperous life (*tempu rai-diak*) (see Trindade and Barnes, Chapter 8; and Palmer, Chapter 10).

War, untimely deaths and social problems (such as infertility or conflict between groups or individuals) are commonly explained through a failure to compensate life-giving entities appropriately or to show due respect. Again, this can involve both human life-givers (wife-givers) or non-human life-givers (sites in the landscape). Whereas many different groups in Timor-Leste have stressed that some of their members used the powers of *lulik* land in order to fight the Indonesian occupiers, conflicts that broke out in 2006 (after independence had been regained) were frequently explained in terms of a failure to thank the subterranean powers of the land appropriately for their help. When a person suffers an untimely death, such 'red' deaths may be explained either as a witchcraft attack or in terms of an ongoing cycle of deaths that was set into motion by a murder that happened decades ago. Absence of rain, infertility of livestock or bad harvests are also frequently seen as resulting from a lack of gratefulness that is shown to the giving environment; such problems are remedied through a number of rituals in which the land is repaid and debts are resolved. Attitudes towards government officials can be structured in similar ways. In Betano, for example, a number of farmers told me that they were happy to give the land to the government, since this act would indebt the government in such a way that government officials would be obliged to repay them and look after them in the future (cf. Miyazaki 2004).

The notion of reciprocity, which is key in the way many rural East Timorese relate to their environment, is significant not just for anthropological discussions of exchange, but connects past, present and future, bringing out the 'temporality of the landscape' (Ingold 1993: 157). Past gifts need to be repaid continuously in the present, and very specific practices are anticipated in the future in response to exchanges that take place in the present moment. The landscape is a source of knowledge that informs such anticipations and imaginations. Ingold's (ibid.: 155) suggestion that meaning is 'gathered from' the landscape, not 'attached to' it, is useful for understanding this dynamic. Conspicuous sites in the landscape are often interpreted to be signs of ancestral significance, and it is through

these sites in the landscape that house groups in Timor-Leste talk about their local histories by recounting the journeys of the ancestors. Narratives about the autochthonous origins of human beings are evoked to make arguments about the spiritual significance of a particular place and the descendants of these first ancestors. Such accounts can be complemented with narratives about how the original populations passed on political power to newcomers, while the autochthones maintained certain ritual responsibilities. This enabled the integration of colonial powers into narratives about ancestral origins (Traube 1986).

However, sites in the landscape are not just evidence for past events, they are also seen to contain signs that reveal something about the future. Everyone who has spent some time living in Timor-Leste probably knows multiple examples of this way of making sense of the present and the future by interpreting the lived environment. This can include the sighting of a large black bird as a sign that ominous events are near, or the suggestion that heavy rains in 1975 signified the impending occupation by Indonesia (Carolina Boldoni, pers. comm.). When water rose inside the newly built electric power plant in Betano more recently (in the Manufahi district), this was interpreted as a sign that the ancestors were unhappy with the construction work and special ritual precautions had to be taken in order to ward off disaster in the future.

The landscape is mined for signs to be interpreted, yet certain individuals are thought to be able to communicate with and even control the environment and hence are able to influence the future. These ‘masters of words’ (*lia-nain*) – ritual speakers – can try to change the outcome of events set in motion, and every customary house has at least one *lia-nain* to speak on its behalf. At times, government officials draw on the aura of such traditional authorities in order to present their own future visions. For example, a story often told is how Xanana Gusmão stopped the rain during a community consultation in Suai. Local residents were so impressed by his powers to ‘control nature’ (*manda natureza*) that they agreed to give up 1,113 hectares of land for the Tasi Mane project to the government.

In this account, the opposition between state versus non-state visions collapses as a state official is seen to draw on localised animist practices – integrating them into a national oil-fuelled vision of modern times to

come. Along these lines, the three parts of this book should not be taken as entirely distinct, but as coexisting in a field of connection, friction and, at times, opposition.

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