



## The promise of prosperity

### Visions of the future in Timor-Leste, Edited by Judith M. Bovensiepen

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## Timor-Leste

### *The promise of prosperity: Visions of the future in Timor-Leste*

Edited by JUDITH M. BOVENSIEPEN

Acton, ACT: ANU Press, 2018. Pp. xiii + 253. Maps, Plates, Tables, References.

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The articles that make up this volume are the result of a symposium held in England in April 2016. The 14 authors were at the time of publication resident in Australia, Brazil, Canada, the Netherlands, Portugal, Timor-Leste, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America, highlighting the international nature of Timor-Leste scholarship. The authors are further diversified by their areas of expertise, which include anthropology, history, law, political science, public policy and East Timorese culture and identity. Most of the authors have been involved in Timor-Leste studies for many years and are well-known in the academic community. With these qualifications, the authors met at the 2016 symposium to discuss and debate current developments in Timor-Leste and the diversity of visions existing for Timor-Leste's future. Central to these discussions and debates was the importance of Timor-Leste's oil wealth to fund this imagined future, as well as the challenges and problems associated with oil-dependent economies. Most of the articles were written in 2016 and revised in 2017, so are now at least four years old. Nevertheless, the book remains relevant because, even though there have been many political and other developments in that time, the central issues discussed in the book are ongoing and still of concern.

A major feature of the book is a focus on development projects, already under way or planned, for various parts of the country. One of them is the Tasi Mane Project located on Timor-Leste's south coast, which aims to turn parts of that area into a massive oil and gas infrastructure network with airfields, seaports, a 160-kilometre multi-lane highway, industrial estates, an oil refinery, and a liquid natural gas plant. Also featured is the creation of a Special Economic Zone of Social Market Economy of Timor-Leste (known by its Portuguese-language acronym as ZEESM) in the Oecusse enclave. The project's designers envisage that this largely agrarian district will be transformed into an industrial hub through the construction of transport facilities, power plants and international-standard hotels. With the provision of this infrastructure, it is anticipated that foreign investors will flock to the district, keen to partake in a range of wealth-creating activities. The ZEESM in Oecusse is intended to be a model for development elsewhere in the country.

As several authors discuss, these developments are contentious, as their success is far from guaranteed. Meanwhile, local populations have been displaced and many complain of inadequate compensation for loss of homes and livelihoods. Both mega-projects are funded with Timor-Leste's oil revenue, but, as several authors recount, there is much concern that successive governments' reliance on oil money indicates that the country is succumbing to the 'resource curse', which is predicated to stifle progress, incite conflict, and facilitate corruption and authoritarian governmental

practices. Many examples of these worrying trends are presented throughout the book.

A recurring theme in the book is the notion that development can be equated with a journey 'from darkness into light'. As several authors explain, this typology is problematic as development can also lead to environmental, social, and other problems. Meanwhile, the subterranean world occupied by the ancestors and spirits is also portrayed as a place of darkness, but not in a negative way, as it is believed that this world is a source of power that can be harnessed to create a more positive future. To achieve this, human beings must repay a perceived debt to the ancestors and other invisible beings through offerings and rituals. The importance of reciprocity in these ritual practices help unite people with their environments and reinforce social and economic relationships.

For many East Timorese, future well-being can only be achieved through proper observation of customs, traditions, and rituals, referred to by the authors with various terms, including *lisan*, *adat* and *kultura*. Places associated with the ancestors are often considered to be *lulik*: sacred and potent. As several authors note, the great revival of customs and traditions since independence is one reason for the differing visions of the future, as there are some East Timorese, such as some Catholic priests, who view these traditional beliefs as a hindrance to development. Meanwhile, it is also demonstrated in the book that the East Timorese state has shown an ambivalent attitude to the importance of customary beliefs. On the one hand, it is supportive, with customary beliefs noted favourably in the Constitution, and government assistance provided to communities for ritual activities. On the other hand, customary land tenure has been ignored during land expropriation for mega-projects, and *lulik* sites have been damaged or destroyed.

A final point to note is the attention paid by many of the authors to the connections between development and nationalism. Criticism of development projects by foreign observers has been characterised as patronising, and development plans presented as part of the ongoing resistance to foreign domination. Meanwhile, nationalist arguments are used to stifle any critique from civil society. The position of resistance veterans in development plans is ambiguous. During meetings for the socialisation of the Tasi Mane Project, community members with concerns about the developments often felt intimidated by the presence of veterans allied with the government. Other veterans, however, are unhappy that their ideals of local communities having a greater say over a future Timor-Leste have been disallowed by the government. It seems that veterans, like the rest of society, have no collective vision of the future.

Timor-Leste continues to evolve in its political, economic, social, and other spheres. This book is a good starting point for anybody interested in understanding the contradictions and complexities to be discovered in those areas. This includes the competing visions for the future from resistance veterans and members of the Catholic church, and the contrast of state-driven development with ritual authority. At its simplest, it can be portrayed as the story of a contest between oil money and the power of the ancestors to provide the 'good life' desired by most East Timorese.

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