

CO-HABITATIONS AND POWER DYNAMICS: LAND, EXCHANGE, GOVERNANCE. TIMOR-LESTE IN CONTEXT



International Conference
Lisboa, Portugal
January 19-24, 2015

Conveners

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Research Project Co-habitations: dynamics of power in Lautém (Timor-Leste)

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In Timor-Leste, as Elizabeth Traube acutely remarked, time is everywhere, and time is not homogeneous. From the *Longue durée* (Fernand Braudel) to the cyclical time of harvests, encompassing different rhythms of change and modes of persistence, time has its own grammar. The arrow of time does not imply that new elements fully replace older ones, but rather that the complexity of social life increases as several layers of time co-exist at one given moment. Timor-Leste has been appointed in many different ways as an example of cultural resilience, political resistance, and clash of paradigms, but also of violent domination by global dynamics of power.

This international conference aims at looking at the accumulation of complexity resulting from dynamics of power in co-habitations. Each section will debate classical themes in the study of Timor-Leste and its regional context - Land and Territory; Exchange and Asymmetry; Governance and Democracy from the analytical viewpoint of evolving power dynamics of co-habitations.

The photo used in this leaflet showing a tomb which combines a Fataluku funerary

that pertains to the long established practices associated with ancestor related practices, the Christian symbol of the cross inherited from the colonial period, and the flag of the resistance movement FRETILIN epitomizes the co-existence of different temporalities and offers a starting point to consider the complexity of the social process. By no means is the notion of “syncretism” the only possible reading of this image, as the emergence of tensions and even conflict recall the need to look deeply into the ways people experience power relations. The idea of “co-habitations” aims at inscribing in the core of a research project on Timor-Leste and its context the mutual influences arising from the existence of distinct social processes not only side by side but in their mutual influences, sometimes resulting from effective clashes. Historicity is therefore a critical element in the comprehension of contemporary social life, as the past still lives in the present, but time itself does not exhaust the sources of competing social phenomena.

Stable, structured relationships between individuals and the constitutive matrix of any society form what Norbert Elias labeled a “configuration”, which is permeated by tensions, and prone to suffer the effects of dynamic forces and undergo significant transformations. An historical sociology emerges then, and the term “reconfiguration” may be recalled to signify the process by virtue of which social relations are reshaped into new structures. Again, the example of the photo used in this leaflet (revealing a situation that is considerably different from the one prevailing a quarter of a century ago) epitomizes a profound restructuration of social elements (tradition, religion, politics) in the course of the specific process of national resistance.

The purpose of this international conference is to test the validity of the approach defined by the combination of the notions of “co-habitations” and “reconfigurations” in a dynamic model of evolving power relations in the case of Timor-Leste and its regional context. Three different aspects will be specifically addressed.

1

First, the broad issue of land and territory. The relationships between people and the land from which they derive their livelihood exemplify the co-habitation of different layers of temporality: customary uses are challenged by “legal titles” originating both in the Portuguese colonial period and the recent Indonesian occupation of the territory. Different articulations of the “right to be included” versus the “right to exclude” are present on the ground. The result of this superimposition of “rights” is the emergence of social tensions. The current government is keen to implement new legislation which is supposed to address the complexity of this problem, but earlier attempts to legislate have raised more questions than those they could answer. This remains a major issue to be tackled by the new democratic state that requires a flexible approach. The purpose of this panel is to contribute to an understanding of the constellation of social forces that shape the human landscape of Timor-Leste and the avenues that are open for an inclusive future. Land is to be understood as territoriality, including not only histories of settlements and displacements but also what the regional literature of the oceanic and southeast Asian context identifies as a kind of a land-view of the world.

This debate will be initiated by an address of **Dionísio Babo Soares**, anthropologist and currently Minister of Justice in the Fifth Government of Timor-Leste, charged with the momentous file of the **Land Bill** (to be confirmed). He also has political responsibilities to find a balance between different sorts of justice and juridical ethos, including the survival of “Tara Bandu” and the principles of a modern state.

2

Second: historical social relations in Timor-Leste have relied on widespread systems of exchange sustained on what has been coined asymmetrical exchange whose normative value is preserved in many present day communities. The winds of “modernity” with their emphasis on individualism and individual rights challenge the persistence of customs and collective, corporate rights, and develop alternative narratives. A case in point is that concerning “barlake”, with a long history of controversy in the Timorese imagination - but is far from being the only one. The aim of this section is to enlarge the focus of attention to other key moments of the social life cycle and include funerary rituals that seem to be positively articulated to those of marriage. In fact, the living and the dead (ancestors) seem to be part of the exchange system and mutually dependent. A direct focus on the specific contribution of funerals and the constitution of ancestors to the general debate on exchange and asymmetry is also expected.

David Hicks (SUNY Stony Brook), a leading authority in the field with extensive work covering half a century, will provide the opening address.

3

Third: governance. The two previous social processes entail the necessity to deal with the emerging tensions between distinct and often conflicting models of social organization. The modern state, based on democratic principles, has acknowledged on different occasions the value of “traditional” authorities, either in political matters (such as the “community leaders” in *sukus* and *aldeias*) or judicial (referring part of the conflicts to customary law and practitioners). The construction of the modern state administration requires that principles of legitimacy pertaining to different social strata be made compatible through persistent negotiations, enabling a common language to emerge. This group will be devoted to furthering our comprehension of the articulations between the different discourses and sources of political legitimacy that permeate the current situation.

This section will be initiated by a contribution of **Michael Leach** (Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne), a political scientist who is very active in the analysis of current trends of governance, as well as in the Timor-Leste Studies Association.

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This International Conference will be held in Lisboa, Portugal, **January 19-24, 2015**. Each of the three different themes will be discussed in one-day sessions, starting with a tone-setting presentation covering the range of issues at stake, followed by up to four presentations with individual contributions from case-studies. A guest speaker will be invited to deliver a key-note speech on the general theme of the event. (**Elizabeth Traube** is the first choice, to be confirmed)

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