

**Kammen, Douglas, *Three Centuries of Conflict in East Timor*,  
Singapore: NUS Press, 231 pp, 2016. ISBN: 9789971698751.**

Anthony Soares<sup>1</sup>

Douglas Kammen's study represents an invaluable contribution to scholarship on the history of East Timor. *Three Centuries of Conflict in East Timor* fills a critical gap between general histories that capture the overarching currents of colonial and post-independence experiences, and studies of discrete historical examples of violence within specific East Timorese localities. What Kammen offers the reader is an analytical focus on a single location—Maubara—that interprets events over a period spanning the years between 1712 and 2012. This counters what the author sees as the prevailing scholarly temptation of “conflating violence—whether that committed by foreign invaders, indigenous resistance to foreigners, or fighting between local actors—with nationalism” (7). Over seven chapters Kammen employs a range of archival and oral sources to disturb interpretative notions of local instances of violence in East Timor as reflections of a wider historical narrative composed of brave East Timorese resistance to external forces that eventually results in national independence.

The opening chapter is constructed around the first appearance in the historical records of an identified ruler of the northern region of Maubara in 1712, and recounts an origin story that tells of the arrival of three royal brothers from Suai Loro on the southern coast of Timor and how the territory of Maubara was divided between them by local leaders, with three local “lieutenants” nominated to assist them. These “stranger” origins that inform the construction of lines of traditional authority in Maubara are interwoven with the commercial activities of the Portuguese, as Kammen recounts how a 1712 trading mission from Macau led to “the names of the owners and their ships pass[ing] to the indigenous rulers with whom they traded” (32). Increasing Portuguese encroachment on Maubara's position “at the nexus of long-distance maritime trade and coastal-hinterland exchange” (19) sees local rulers forge alliances with the Dutch East India Company based in Kupang at the western end of the island of Timor. Chapter 2 provides a detailed account of the intense diplomatic activities between the Dutch and the Doutel family—one of the lines of traditional rulers of Maubara—with the author arguing that this period of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Centre for Cross Border Studies, Northern Ireland. E-mail: [a.soares@qub.ac.uk](mailto:a.soares@qub.ac.uk)

region's history is neglected in the oral tradition because it "did not fit within the imperial narratives promoted by the Portuguese during late colonial rule or the nationalist narrative that took root in 1975 and has been reinforced since 1999 of 450 years of Portuguese colonial rule" (60).

With the second chapter recording the decline of Dutch involvement in Maubara in the early nineteenth century that resulted in the territorial trade deal completed with the Portuguese in 1859, the next three chapters analyse the recurrence of violence under Portuguese colonial rule until 1974. Chapter 3 shows how Dutch withdrawal from Maubara severely undermined the position of the Doutel family who were deeply hostile to the Portuguese presence and the rise to power of rival indigenous rulers such as Dom Carlos of Vatuvo allied to Portugal—hostility which frequently led to outbreaks of violence. Kammen sees the recurrence of violence as the inevitable result of a weak Portuguese colonial presence that opted for a form of indirect rule through local traditional rulers. Chapter 4 analyses the context for and the course of the failed plot to throw out the Portuguese and obtain Dutch protection in 1893, which in turn led to a devastating military response in Maubara by the Portuguese authorities and their local allies. As Chapter 5 shows in rich detail, Maubara's trading and political structures were then deeply affected by a more direct form of colonial rule that sought to maximise the economic returns to be obtained from Portuguese Timor with, for example, the intensification of coffee production. According to the author, and "In contrast to both imperial and nationalist narratives of colonial rule in twentieth century Timor constructed around colonial glory and nationalist resistance," Chapter 5 "focuses on the more mundane processes by which late colonial rule transformed local elites and marginalized the populace from the land" (96). This is in line with the general thrust of Kammen's study, which is claimed to offer a micro-historical corrective to the predominance of macro-histories that are seen as furnishing either an imperialist or nationalist narrative of East Timor.

The book's final chapters cover the period from 1974 until 2012, with Chapter 6 analysing how the formation of East Timorese political parties in the wake of Portugal's Carnation Revolution was reflected in Maubara, and how the region was affected by the brief civil war in 1975 that pitted the UDT (*União Democrática Timorense*) against Fretilin (*Frente Revolucionária do Timor-Leste Independente*). As Kammen neatly summarizes the situation during this period: "Over the course of fifteen months the old colonial order had been shattered and the people of Maubara had been thrust into the whirlwind of decolonization and political competition" (125). The same chapter then provides a detailed

account of the violence of the Indonesian occupation from 1975 to 1998, and how the population of Maubara either resisted or “as occupation became a fact of life, competition arose over recognition and positions in the Indonesian regime” (139). The concluding chapter begins with the violence perpetrated by the Indonesian military and their local militias in the run-up to and in the wake of the 1998 referendum that finally set the path for East Timorese independence that would become a reality in 2002. It also analyses the UN period of administration (1998-2002) and attempts to address the legacy of past violence, as well as the extent to which post-independence electoral politics have impacted on the standing of traditional ruling families in Maubara.

What Kammen describes in this book’s introduction as “an experiment in using a combination of thin archival sources and potentially endless oral interviews to reconstruct the history of violence in a small, far-flung place” (21) can certainly be considered successful in terms of highlighting how distinct local motivations driving economic and political relations can be masked by colonial and nationalist narratives. That undoubted success, however, in certain instances can also be seen to in itself mask scholarship on East Timor that should not be included, for example, in what Kammen describes as the “now numerous studies on the United Nations missions in East Timor, the building of state institutions, and postconflict development [that] treat independent Timor-Leste as a ‘blank slate’” (144). Moreover, and despite the qualification that this has been the case “Until quite recently” it is somewhat problematic that the author suggests that “there has been a consensus among scholars of Timor that the indigenous population was generally hostile to European encroachment and opposed colonial rule” (42). According to Kammen this consensus is the result of two schools of thought that both adopt macro-historical perspectives: one comprised of “Portuguese historians” who highlight “Portuguese ambitions and imperial grandeur” (42), and the other of “a handful of non-Portuguese scholars” who focus on “the nation-to-be” (42). This is a generalization that unfairly ignores more nuanced work undertaken by Portuguese and non-Portuguese scholars alike.

It could be argued that instances such as these point to the continuing need to bridge a gap between academic disciplines. Scholars involved in postcolonial studies, for example, have done much to undercut the notion of “imperial grandeur” and to highlight the complex relations between Timorese communities and a weak Portuguese colonial presence, as well as the reverberations of the past in post-independence East Timor that deny the possibility of seeing it as a “blank slate”. Scholarship on East Timor that takes a postcolonial studies approach is informed by and depends on the work of historians—but

it also draws from other academic fields and from East Timorese narratives that are not necessarily contained in archival records. For example, in reading Kammen's invaluable study of the complex relations between local and supra-local experiences that may be written out of imperial and nationalist narratives, what may come to mind is the description of the 1975 civil war offered in a novel of East Timorese authorship: "Rixas entre familiares que se acantonaram em facções opostas para ajustarem contas antigas que tinham mais a ver com as posses das terras e as desavenças familiares do que com as perturbações de ordem política ou partidárias" (Cardoso, 37). Kammen's study is undeniably rich and essential reading for those interested in understanding Timor-Leste, but that richness should not hide a wealth of scholarship that lies outside the boundaries of a particular academic discipline.

## References

Cardoso, Luís. *A Última Morte do Coronel Santiago*. Lisbon: D. Quixote, 2003.