

# Book Review

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**Nygaard-Christensen, Maj and Angie Bexley. *Fieldwork in Timor-Leste. Understanding Social Change through Practice*. Copenhagen: Nias Press, 2017, 262 pages.**

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*Fieldwork in Timor-Leste. Understanding Social Change through Practice* is intended for researchers in the anthropology of practice, development, and international cooperation. It is a collective effort edited by Nygaard-Christensen and Bexley, two anthropologists recognized for their research on international interventions in the context of development in Indonesia and Timor-Leste, also known as East Timor. In this book, the authors present different scales of studies and analyses, carried out in this southeast region of Asia.

Two different events propelled the edition of the book. On the one hand, a reflection on social change through the perspective of practice, with origins that date to a previous collaboration between the researchers in a journal dedicated exclusively to the social and cultural realities of Timor-Leste. On the other hand, after a joint participation in an international conference on social changes, the authors decided to follow through with an intellectual approach to Timor-Leste, by bringing together both their interests and research results, in a single volume.

With eleven chapters, the book offers a panoply of field experiences from qualitative and practical studies. The aspiration of Nygaard-Christensen and Bexley is to capture the changes in the country from its different historical moments. Hence, with this collection of ethnographic literature centred on the region, in the form of a series of varied articles, the authors wish to establish a community of academic practice dedicated to reflections on Timor-Leste.

The analysis of the historical perspective opens the debate, followed by addressing the issues of anthropology of practice in Southeast Asia. Throughout an examination of five central themes, the authors attempt to understand the processes of social change in Timor-Leste. The chapters cover a wide variety

of historical and archaeological studies and develop a reflection on the role of ethnographic research within the context of international cooperation.

*Fieldwork in Timor-Leste* takes a particular interest in topics related to the production and the contestation of the Timorese nation. The authors engage in identifying and analyzing the cultural categories essential to the production of a precise idea of Timor-Leste as an independent country. Moreover, the analysis of the effects of the occupation of the territory by foreign organizations during the country's processes of transition to the status of an autonomous nation makes up the core of the book. The authors seek an understanding of the fundamental role that the international institutions have played in the identification and definition of the cultural outlines of this new and emerging nation, and which lead to the creation of a particular idea of Timor-Leste.

With the aid of several periods of ethnographic research, the authors attempt to understand the processes that lead to the constitution of this new national identity. Nygaard-Christensen and Bexley reflect on the main challenges of everyday practice in the field, in a political context of a regime change. Their reflections focus on the mechanisms of identity contestation to grasp the political transition that takes place in Timor-Leste, without, however considering a deeper reflection on ethnographic method.

Even though the authors engage in rich discussions of the historical and political context of Timor-Leste, the book does not seek to offer an in-depth examination of the construction of the Timorese political subject; nor does it analyze the relationship between individual identities and the sense of community within the nation. The main goal of this book is not to serve as a field guide of Timor-Leste. It wishes to offer an anthropological discussion on the elements of ambivalence and negotiation. Besides, it encourages critical reflection on the production of social change, with a problematization of processes of confrontation and "encounters" that are always produced in situations of international development.

By inscribing the region in an international debate, Nygaard-Christensen and Bexley's work represents a source of critical reflection on transnational cooperation by problematizing different cultural categories created in the local context of the country's independence process. Its goal is to problematize the effects of foreign political administrations in Timorese society, and the changes that these interventions, at the local level, brought. While these interventionist aspects have strongly influenced political imaginations and the sense of

belonging in Timorese identity, they also have been internally appropriated in the daily reality of Timorese subjects.

This book work enriches, without a doubt, the existing literature on the anthropology of practice, specifically carried out in Asia. By focusing on the impact of speeches and narratives, this book adopts an approach centred around daily practices. Thus, it seeks to reveal the ambiguity between the institutional discourses and the practices of people, bringing to the fore an idea of fluidity.

The book offers a welcome critique of the anthropology of institutions, therefore making it possible to rethink the way in which ethnography is carried out in the discipline and within the contexts of international development, an important contribution from this work. The book is well worth reading, as it takes up and reorganizes the thought particularly linked to the ideas of development and globalization. This book will certainly inspire future anthropological reflections on the region, as well as epistemological debates on the notion of agency.

This work is thus quite relevant for everyone interested in the study of international cooperation and development. Ultimately, this fascinating book fosters dialogue among specialists and is aimed at an audience that is well-versed in the debates surrounding globalization. However, the authors do not develop a conclusion at the end of the book, which would have created connections between the analyses grouped together, and enriched matters.