

SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/>

<Book Review>

Alberto Fidalgo Castro

Kisho Tsuchiya. *Emplacing East Timor: Regime Change and Knowledge Production, 1860–2010*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2024.

Southeast Asian Studies, Vol. 14, No. 2, August 2025, pp. 394-398.

How to Cite: Castro, Alberto Fidalgo. Review of *Emplacing East Timor: Regime Change and Knowledge Production, 1860–2010* by Kisho Tsuchiya. *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2, August 2025, pp. 394-398. DOI: 10.20495/seas.br25008.

Link to this book review:

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/2025/08/vol-14-no-2-book-reviews-alberto-fidalgo-castro/>

View the table of contents for this issue:

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/2025/08/vol-14-no-2-of-southeast-asian-studies/>

Subscriptions: <https://englishkyoto-seas.org/mailling-list/>

For permissions, please send an e-mail to:

english-editorial[at]cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp



Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University

Edition. Boston: Beacon Press.

Thant Myint-U. 2019. *The Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism, and the Crisis of Democracy in the 21st Century*. London: Atlantic Books.

Woods, Kevin. 2011. Ceasefire Capitalism: Military–Private Partnerships, Resource Concessions and Military–State Building in the Burma–China Borderlands. *Journal of Peasant Studies* 38(4): 747–770. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2011.607699>.

Emplacing East Timor: Regime Change and Knowledge Production, 1860–2010

KISHO TSUCHIYA

Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2024.

In *Emplacing East Timor: Regime Change and Knowledge Production, 1860–2010*, Tsuchiya Kisho examines the relationship between regime change and the production of knowledge about Timor-Leste, presenting a global intellectual history of the territory. Tsuchiya argues that this understanding must begin with a critical analysis of sources that reflect how different regimes and communities of knowledge generated categorizations that classified Timor and its people within a specific ideological order. These relationships, in turn, shaped and modeled the ways of imagining Timorese people that are still influential today. By exploring these relationships, the author reveals biases and errors, as well as the intentions behind historical narratives allowing for a more accurate representation of Timorese voices and experiences, highlighting the importance of considering both prior knowledge and contemporary discourses in constructing the history of Timor-Leste. Instead of a teleological view of history that presents Timor-Leste’s independence as a completed success narrative, Tsuchiya analyzes the political and social history of the space that is now Timor-Leste based on the heuristic concept of the “cycle of violence,” which consists of a recurring pattern of (1) mass violence and migration, (2) regime change, and (3) stabilization, resulting in violent regime changes.

The first chapter serves as a starting point for tracing the genesis of the dominant existing visions regarding Timor-Leste and its people. In it, Tsuchiya examines Anglophone perceptions of the history and identity of East Timor between 1975 and 2002, in a politicized context of decolonization and the Indonesian invasion. The narrative of Timorese history in English begins in 1974, relegating the precolonial past and the five hundred years of Portuguese colonialism to a “prehistory.” Representations in these studies highlight three narratives: Timor-Leste as a nation separate from Indonesia, as a victim of genocide, and as a space of resistance. The author points out biases in these studies derived from a lack of diversity in sources and outdated methodologies.

The first part of the book, “Emplacing the Timorese in the Colonial Wars, from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the 1940s,” focuses on the various approaches and “emplacements” that

occurred during the implementation of “indirect rule” by Portuguese colonizers. Chapter 2 explores how ethnohistory and racial categorization of the Timorese were socially constructed during the colonial wars of the nineteenth century. Tsuchiya analyzes how Western observers interpreted Timor through various perspectives, generating definitions that reflected colonial expansion more than Timorese self-images. The terms “Malay” and “Papuan” are recurrent, and their use influenced perceptions of Timorese identity. In Chapter 3, the author evaluates the works of Portuguese and Dutch physical anthropologists in their attempt to classify the Timorese within broader racial categories. Tsuchiya emphasizes how physical anthropology of the time imagined Timorese populations through racial (Malay, Papuan, mestizo) and pseudo-ethnic (Belunese and Atoni) categories, arguing that the Timorese were reduced to rigid identities, thus highlighting the impact this had on colonial perception. The fourth and final chapter of the first part analyzes Dutch historiography regarding Timor within the context of the Indonesian archipelago, emphasizing the centrality of Java in colonial narratives and how this led to the simplification of the histories of peripheral islands like Timor. In this chapter, Tsuchiya examines how the hierarchical understanding of space (metropolis-colony), characteristic of European colonial regimes, contributed to the overrepresentation of the precolonial dominance of civilizations like Kediri and Majapahit over Timor.

Part 2 of the book, “Between Nationalism and Portuguese Multiracialism, 1941–1970s,” focuses on the second cycle of violent regime change in Timor, spanning from World War II and the subsequent Portuguese reoccupation of colonial Timor. This part begins with Chapter 5, which examines how World War II altered the perception of Timor and what it meant to be Timorese. During this conflict, Japanese occupation introduced a new framework of identity that challenged Portuguese colonial structures and prompted a brief period of unification of the island of Timor (Portuguese and Dutch) under Japanese rule. This change generated growing resentment toward Portuguese colonizers, becoming a catalyst for nationalism in the region and contributing to the eventual collapse of Portuguese colonialism. Tsuchiya adds historical sources from the Japanese army, which were previously undervalued in historiography, to present a richer and more complex view of how the Timorese conducted themselves during this conflict. In Chapter 6, the focus shifts to the post-World War II period up to the early 1960s. In this context, different representations and struggles for identity emerge as the Timorese grapple with a persistent colonial legacy and aspirations for self-determination. The author shows how the official narrative of the Portuguese government, which depicted Timorese as “loyal natives,” did not reflect the reality of events, classifying the participation of natives from Portuguese Timor in the Black Columns as Timorese from the Dutch part of the island. The chapter also examines how, in the 1950s, discourses on self-determination and anticolonialism emerged. Portugal sought to redefine itself as a multiracial nation, granting citizenship to Timorese considered “civilized.” Tsuchiya exposes the contradiction between the government’s intentions and the harsh socioeconomic reality facing East Timorese,

marked by discrimination against the majority of the population that did not meet such standards. Details of the Viqueque rebellion in 1959 are included, showcasing Portuguese authorities' concerns about Timor's relationship with Indonesia, which was emerging as a leader in the global anticolonial movement under Sukarno. The seventh chapter, the last of the second part, analyzes the work of Fernando Sylvan, a Timorese poet and essayist who presented his vision of Portugal and the Portuguese community between the 1940s and 1970s. In his childhood, Sylvan saw Timor as his "Mother Land," imagining the island as part of Portugal. However, as he moved into the 1960s, his writing fluctuated between the multiracialism of the Portuguese regime and anticolonial notions. By the late 1970s, his vision had evolved toward a more pronounced nationalism, considering Timor as an "island" rather than a mere "territory." The chapter also discusses the ideology of lusotropicalism, which attempted to present more humane relations in the colonial context in response to the exploitation experienced during the Pacific War and the growing nationalism in Asia and Africa.

The third part of the book, "Revisiting Timorese Movements and Indonesian Occupation, 1970s–1990s," explores the beginnings of the last complete "basic cycle of violence" to date, analyzing the reimagining of East Timorese in the context of decolonization, civil war, and the Indonesian invasion by various actors (Portuguese, Indonesians, and the East Timorese themselves). Tsuchiya analyzes how these actors adopted selective approaches, questioning the "placing" of Timor and its population from ethnological and historiographical knowledge. During this period, a new classificatory genealogy emerged that presented the Timorese as a "non-Indonesian other," emphasizing their linguistic, religious, and historical differences in the narrative of Timor-Leste in relation to Indonesia. The author notes that the global context of decolonization and the dynamics of the Cold War favored Indonesia, which legitimized its domination of East Timor with the notion of a "shared identity." The ninth chapter, the last of the third part, focuses on how the FRETILIN (Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor) movement conceptualized the Timorese nation and its territory between 1974 and 1975, framing its struggle within the cultural context of Timor and Southeast Asia. FRETILIN located Timor within an international anticolonial and anti-imperial struggle, defending its belonging to the South Pacific, not to Indonesia. To mobilize the rural population, movement leaders adapted their rhetoric to local cultural traditions, presenting the idea of "Timor Land" and redefining Portuguese colonizers as "colonial masters." Tsuchiya investigates how elements of local cosmology were integrated into FRETILIN's discourse, promoting a shared memory that contributed to the development of a national consciousness among Timorese people and facilitated the creation of the "imagined community" of Timor-Leste.

Finally, in the conclusion, Tsuchiya reviews some of the main underlying and recurring elements that have remained constant throughout the various cycles of violence and dynamics of emplacement-creation: (1) all cycles have exhibited comparable levels of violence in terms of total numbers (colonial wars, World War II, and the Indonesian invasion); (2) the divisions between

highland and lowland areas, as well as the challenges of territorial borders, have consistently generated tensions; and (3) the presence of an East Timorese diaspora whose liminal identity is in constant dispute has been a persistent factor that provokes ongoing tensions.

Tsuchiya's methodological approach innovatively combines various academic traditions. His analysis utilizes sources in Portuguese, Dutch, Indonesian, Chinese, Japanese, and English, representing a significant improvement over other studies (Gunn 1999; Farram 2004; Figueiredo 2004; Kammen 2015). By utilizing these sources, the author triangulates specific historical events, leading to new interpretations, including the motivations for East Timorese people's support of either side during the Pacific War, their backing of various political parties in the 1970s, and the Indonesian invasion and occupation, all viewed through the lens of how different "emplacements" affected their lives.

As I see it, one of the most notable contributions of this volume is the author's use of participant observation, which he terms "ethnographic experience." This aspect is crucial, as it recognizes the Timorese people as active subjects in history, not just passive entities, and thus successfully integrates their voices in the making and remaking of their diverse historical and come-into-being identities. Through the analysis of everyday language, social interactions, and contextualizing events within the local worldview, Tsuchiya provides a view of Timorese history that complexifies the narrative of how the people lived their historical experiences.¹⁾ Tsuchiya frames his work within the "decolonial" project, critically examining precolonial and colonial sources to understand the relationships between authors and Timorese people, as well as to view Timorese as a heterogeneous group of individuals and reconsider historical terms according to local social realities.

Emplacing East Timor is undoubtedly a very important read for scholars, students, and anyone interested in the intersections of history, identity, and power. The author's dedication to deconstructing entrenched narratives and emphasizing the importance of local perspectives makes a significant contribution to studies of East Timor. This book stands as a foundational text for future research, inviting deeper exploration and critical discourse on Timorese history.

Alberto Fidalgo Castro

*Department of Social Anthropology and Social Psychology, Complutense University of Madrid;
Graduate Program in Social Anthropology, University of Brasilia (PPGAS/UnB)*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0538-5582>

1) Elsewhere, Tsuchiya has authored a compelling account of his fieldwork experiences and intellectual journey, highlighting how many of these experiences shaped the questions that this book seeks to address (Tsuchiya 2022).

References

- Farram, Steven Glen. 2004. From “Timor Koepang” to “Timor NTT”: A Political History of West Timor, 1901–1967. PhD dissertation, Charles Darwin University. <https://doi.org/10.25913/5ea8ca1d6aa1b>.
- Figueiredo, Fernando Augusto de. 2004. Timor: A Presença Portuguesa (1769–1945). PhD dissertation, Universidade de Porto. <http://hdl.handle.net/10216/10864>, accessed December 16, 2024.
- Gunn, Geoffrey C. 1999. *Timor Loro Sae: 500 Years*. Macau: Livros do Oriente.
- Kammen, Douglas. 2015. *Three Centuries of Conflict in East Timor*. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press.
- Tsuchiya Kisho. 2022. What Was “Independence” for the East Timorese? A Historian’s Autobiographical Reflections over Perceptions of the Past. *Revista Oriente* 29: 91–104.