

Douglas Kammen. *Three Centuries of Conflict in East Timor*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015. 240 pp.

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Travelers to the town of Maubara tend to be weekend visitors from Dili, the capital of Timor-Leste (East Timor), or foreigners in search of dive sites. Even if they wander into the old Dutch fort, few visitors know much about the days when Maubara was a strong Timorese kingdom, about its historic alliance with the Netherlands, or about the violence that runs like a blooded thread through Maubara's history under Portuguese, Japanese, Indonesian, and Timorese governments.

Douglas Kammen, whose previous work addresses mass violence in East Timor during the Indonesian occupation (1975–99), picks up the thread of violence in this book and traces it back through three hundred years with a micro-history of the kingdom (and, subsequently, a sub-district) of Maubara, for much of its history “a very small place in a remote colony at the furthest edge of a vagabond empire” (119). His story of Maubara and its leading families, at the same time, has larger ambitions, aiming at learning lessons about mass violence in general and at stitching together evidence from colonial archives and from local memory.

The historic kingdom, of course, is not the same as today's seaside village, with its beach café, marketplace, and local NGO selling handicrafts and cold drinks from the courtyard of the old fort. The kingdom's centers lay higher up Mount Maubara, with authority often dispersed among different settlements and families.

Kammen examines the *longue durée* in a limited locale. “Stranger kings” established a kingdom in Maubara that is there in the archival records, but almost entirely absent from local memory. Kammen reconstructs this early history based on archival records, without oral history to help him. (Despite hundreds of interviews on which Kammen relied, discussed later, the people in Maubara simply didn't talk about this aspect of the past.)

Local memory does recall the coming of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) to Maubara and the kingdom's alliance with the Dutch, though in hazy fashion. Again, Kammen's careful reconstruction of the surprising alliance between Maubara and the VOC (whose empire eventually became the Dutch East Indies) relies on archival documentation. The VOC and the ruling houses of Maubara were allied from the 1750s to the 1850s. This century of mutual benefit saw VOC rulers in Kupang, West Timor, extend their influence into the central part of the island, advancing their contest with the Portuguese who claimed the alliance or allegiance of most of this area. Maubara became “the centerpiece of VOC expansion into north-central Timor” (47) while benefiting from the VOC alliance by seemingly strengthening itself relative to neighboring kingdoms. Kammen's account reveals Maubara as an autonomous actor in wider regional currents, not a mere pawn in a battle between colonial powers. It was only in 1859 that Portuguese control started to arrive in Maubara, which local

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rulers resisted because they did not want to surrender access to overseas trading networks or ties (represented in the symbolic realm through gifts of Dutch flags and other items) with the VOC in Kupang.

To Kammen, the symbolic realm matters more. People in Maubara know that the imposing seaside fort is a colonial construction. Its physicality should serve as a reminder of the Dutch presence and of the days of Maubara's glory. Yet Kammen's interviews show local memory dwelling more on division between lineages and on origin stories than on past greatness; on individuals, not on statecraft. The motives of Maubara's rulers cannot be made visible in colonial archives or in oral history, and Kammen thus follows the thread of local memory, seeking meaning and finding continuities.

From a colonial viewpoint, the story of Maubara coming under Portuguese rule is typical. European power increased in pace with economic change. Portugal's desire for ever-greater coffee production transformed Maubara's local economy and social structure as it became a major center of coffee production. Some individuals in Maubara opposed increasing colonial political control, while others sided with it, seeing personal advancement in collaboration with the colonial power. In this reading, Maubara sounds little different from a Malayan Sultanate, for instance, in which local factions sided with or against British colonial figures amidst local contests driven by local factors, all against a background of economic change motivated by expanding cash crop economies. There is even a supporting role for ethnic-Chinese traders who had become a significant local presence. Kammen does not attempt comparison, but his careful microhistory provides a valuable case study for those who might compare it to other microhistories in the wider region.

Maubara had seen violence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, of course, but it first saw *mass* violence at the hands of an outside power in 1893. The Portuguese employed brutal force to crush what they saw as a local uprising, including burning the homes of over half of the people in the kingdom. The scale of this attack left scarcely a trace on today's oral accounts—it is a forgotten episode of colonial terror even in the area where it took place. Yet Portuguese archival records depict a major event, a decisive defeat of strong resistance to Portuguese rule in the once-powerful kingdom. There is no lack of violence at the hands of the colonial power: records tell of dozens of hamlets “burned” and “seized and conquered,” and of bombardment from a warship stationed off the coast. How can this absence in memory be reconciled with the centrality of the event in the national story of Portuguese Timor? This is Kammen's central question in telling the story of the 1893 “uprising.” Menacing in Portuguese accounts, it was merely “symbolic” from a local standpoint, he concludes: the product of internal rivalries. In linking to larger theories of mass violence, he notes that the local rivalries were mapped onto a pro- or anti-Portuguese frame. When local notables decided to “ask for a Dutch flag from Atapupu,” the closest command post in Dutch West Timor (86), the locals were not declaring war on Portugal; instead, they were activating symbolic local memory to enhance their own standing. The conflict that caused so much suffering as Portuguese troops advanced up Mount Maubara, burning villages as they went, was about local divisions. Yet it was also “pan-national,” involving Dutch flags, Hakka Chinese merchants, and wider regional rivalries.

Kammen writes that the anticolonial stance of leading families “must have been shaped, consciously or otherwise, by stories of previous hostilities to the Portuguese, the struggles during the last four decades of the nineteenth century, and long-standing rivalries between competing lineages” (95). This is a central argument of the book: that memories of violence and rivalry linked to specific prominent families shaped local manifestations of violence in the twentieth century, including at the end of Portuguese rule (1974–75) and at the end of Indonesian rule (1999). The proposition is difficult to prove given the evidence base of colonial archives and local oral tellings, and the large gaps in each. For the later-twentieth century, however, Kammen is able to draw on more than a hundred oral history interviews that include living memory, eyewitness accounts, and other elements of the oral historian’s tool kit.

In 1974–75, hammered by the blows of colonial wars in Africa, Portugal’s empire collapsed. East Timor began to walk a road towards decolonization. The story of the Indonesian invasion and occupation that followed is well known to readers of this journal. Kammen’s book can be located with the now-substantial historiography on the quarter-century of Indonesian occupation, with its toll of deaths, famine, human rights violations of all kinds, and mass violence. He rejects the common understanding of the story as one located in national history and in international politics, preferring an approach centered in local understandings even while accepting that these were woven together with national and international dimensions. “Viewed in national terms it is all too easy to see the Indonesian occupation as a single period dominated by the struggle between the colossal occupying regime and a brave but puny resistance,” Kammen writes. “But viewed from below, the occupation was experienced in terms of a constant intertwining of local meanings, emerging national ideals, and adaptation to a foreign power. The past informed people’s choices and individuals interpreted or appealed to the past to justify their positions and actions” (120). In other words, the Timor story is not one of increasing coalescence of national identity and national resistance to occupation, but one that drew on local pasts, local events, local memory. Violence is not isolated within that quarter-century, 1974–99, but echoes into the years before and the years of independence afterward.

In 1974–75 in Maubara, different families tracing their lineage back to the kingdom of Maubara chose different national political parties with which to identify. Local violence in the brief 1975 civil war between the two leading parties, FRETILIN (Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente, Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor) and UDT (União Democrática Timorense, Timorese Democratic Union), was, in Kammen’s view, as much about local factors as interparty rivalries. The invasion, when it reached Maubara, was accompanied by mass violence on the part of the colonial power that recalls the Portuguese brutality of 1893: Kammen carefully reconstructs the facts of the mass execution of the Hakka Chinese male population by arriving Indonesian troops in 1976, for instance. Indonesian control of Maubara involved attempts to co-opt local figures, with some success. Some of the families whose stories Kammen traces opted for various forms of resistance; others chose collaborative paths. The same might be said for many localities throughout the country, where Timorese had to make tough choices and were never unambiguously united—even if the majority would always have been happy to see the Indonesian army depart. Here, again, there is rich scope for comparison of microhistories, to compare experiences in Maubara to other parts of East Timor.

Kammen's treatment of the end of the occupation is also mapped onto the flood of post-independence literature on East Timor. Almost all of this literature treats the wave of pro-Indonesian militia violence that accompanied a referendum vote for independence in 1999 as watershed. It divorces the Indonesian occupation from the post-conflict years that followed. Yet conflict and violence endured. Kammen takes issue with the post-conflict literature that treats East Timor after 1999 as a "blank slate" (144) on which international actors and national elites tried to inscribe their dreams of a better nation, even a "utopia," in the words of the United Nations mission chief (15).

If this book has a central figure, it is Mau Kuru, scion of the old royal family and local elder by 1999, who was the first man in Maubara to be murdered by the Besi Merah Putih (Red and White Iron) militia. His murder can be understood as a pro-Indonesia gang killing a pro-independence sympathizer and bringing national-level violence to Maubara. In Kammen's reading, that misses the local picture and elides the very real continuities over time in Maubara. Inter-family rivalries and a competition to control vital ritual (*lisan*, or *adat*) objects provides a better explanation, one that does not bury the local story in the new national narrative. Kammen opens and closes with Mau Kuru's story, weaves him through the later chapters, and carries out a detailed forensic reconstruction of his murder. The story is not, in this reconstruction, the same as that given in the national truth commission report, *Chega!* Post-independence justice is also read as inadequate: of Mau Kuru's three killers, one was found guilty of involvement in the more notorious Liquiça church massacre, while the other two did not face the UN-mandated Serious Crimes process. Indeed, the truth-seeking process created as many problems as it resolved in parts of Maubara, as national elites overlooked key local concerns. Free elections in 2002, then, "did not take place in the clear air of a new and perfect democratic dawn. The slate was never blank" (159). Even post-independence party identification mapped well onto existing inter-family rivalries, Kammen argues.

The author and publisher have tried to locate this book's contribution within the wider study of mass violence. If there is a thesis here, it is that "[r]ecurrent mass violence ... does not produce a given outcome but rather becomes entwined with local understandings of the past, with local as well as supralocal allegiances and rivalries, and with attachments to the nation" (121). Without explicit comparisons or an extended consideration of this literature, it is difficult to assess this book's contribution to the study of mass violence. Kammen suggests that the literature offers two broad approaches: the view that the memory of past conflict shapes present violence, versus a focus on statebuilding and the failure of state institutions. His study by implication favors the first approach, but does not explicitly engage with the second approach or with broader questions in depth.

It is more useful to consider the book's contribution to the emerging literature on Timorese history and politics. Too many observers, he argues, "have assumed that local events are fully intelligible simply and matter-of-factly in terms of national conflicts and narratives" (3). Kammen argues that "the subordination of episodic and recurrent violence to a single national narrative is problematic" (7); his book makes a major contribution in developing this point. Between romantic stories of heroic national resistance, ahistorical accounts that ignore the past in trying to write a new

nation, transitional justice stories that seek to “heal” an unreconciled past, and anthropological studies more concerned with the “ethnographic present” than in tracing change over time, there is a dearth of local histories and a dearth of local perspectives in national histories.

Kammen refuses to seek usable pasts. In surveying the years 1893–1974, for instance, he rejects “both imperial and national narratives of colonial rule in twentieth century Timor constructed around colonial glory and nationalist resistance,” preferring to trace “the more mundane processes by which late colonial rule transformed local elites and marginalized the populace from the land” (96). He equally refuses to be driven by either colonial archives or oral history alone, seeking instead to combine them in ways that “cross-fertilize one another [and thus] allow us to reconstruct the dynamics of recurrent violence and illuminate the meanings of past violence and the challenges of independence in the present” (19). It is hard to disagree with the implication that those challenges cannot be solved at the national level alone.

East Timor’s “postconflict mirage” (18), Kammen writes, was shattered in 2006 as internal violence reemerged, leading to talk of a “failed state” dogged by “cultures of violence.” Kammen notes that this is colonialist talk, revived for a new century. It is worth adding that Timor-Leste did not become a failed state after 2006, any more than it had been a post-conflict “utopia” before 2006. The reality, as always, is much more complicated. Kammen has done a valuable service in complicating the literature on East Timor through a fascinating, detailed, and revealing microhistory of an important and interesting locality.