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Timor-Leste, Indonesia and Melanesia***

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# Book Review: *Flowers in the Wall: Truth and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste, Indonesia and Melanesia*

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*Flowers in the Wall: Truth and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste, Indonesia and Melanesia*

David Webster, editor

Calgary, University of Calgary Press, 2017

376 Pages; Price: \$34.95 Paperback

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This collection of essays by academics and activists provides the first survey of truth and reconciliation processes that have taken place in the region comprising Indonesia, Timor-Leste, and Melanesia. Its primary aim is to document and share their experience of truth and reconciliation, offering a framework that juxtaposes the different approaches based not only on geography but also on the idea that human rights atrocities are driven by “clashing historical narratives.”<sup>1</sup> Underlying this framework is the argument that truth-seeking processes can be leveraged to resolve root causes of conflicts. Truth-seeking is not viewed from an institutional or legal lens. Rather, truth-seeking and reconciliation are captured as an interactive and historical process that gradually weaves unofficial narratives with official ones. Poetry and song feature prominently in this text to demonstrate how this process can occur outside of formal, time-bound governmental processes to address injustice.

The book asserts that truth-seeking processes hinge on civil society’s ability to disseminate knowledge between institutions and the populace as well as between different countries and truth commissions. As such, the volume connects the lessons learned in this region to efforts towards truth and reconciliation with indigenous people in Canada, where the book was published. Many of the authors participated directly in the truth-seeking processes they analyze, which highlights these civil society dynamics.

The discussion is organized by nation and is further divided into sections on different conflicts. It begins with essays on truth and reconciliation in Timor-Leste in response to the atrocities that many have characterized as genocide.<sup>2</sup> The study of Timor-Leste is followed by analysis of an array of truth-seeking efforts in different parts of Indonesia that progress chronologically from 1965 as well as from national to local responses. The section on the Solomon Islands expands on the topic of truth-seeking and reconciliation in conflicts characterized by ethnic tensions. The final case study looks at the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The book devotes the greatest number of essays to Timor-Leste, which sets the foundations for the rest of the book. The analysis of the truth commission final report dissemination process is relevant for anyone with an interest in institutional legacies or historical memory of genocide. Other key themes emerge in this section, including the role of the church in truth-seeking; linkages between international economy, conflict and truth; and the secretive forms that narrative and reconciliation can take even after the throes of conflict subside. These themes reach their most eloquent expression in later sections of the book.

The ingenuity at play in the region is best described in the chapter by Lia Kent and Rizki Affai on Aceh’s Commission for Truth and Reconciliation. They analyze the benefits and limitations of the world’s first permanent truth and reconciliation commission, which has no temporal limit on its investigations. Their essay also traces how the Timor-Leste experience influenced truth-seeking in Aceh, while capturing Aceh’s unique aspects. In this regard, their consideration of how

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<sup>1</sup> David Webster, ed., *Flowers in the Wall: Truth and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste, Indonesia and Melanesia* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2017), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Webster, *Flowers in the Wall*, 46.

the devastating tsunami in Aceh in 2004 influenced truth-seeking is significant, since it coincided with post-conflict assistance. This essay illustrates how truth-seeking unfolds episodically due to political, economic, cultural, and environmental factors.

The chapter devoted to the translated diary of an executed Indonesian political prisoner (Gatot Lestario) in 1965 is an example of the powerful contrasts in the volume between official and unofficial truths. Lestario's testimony in print for a global audience is the book's evidence of a state's inability to fully control truth-seeking, in either time or space.

The strengths of this book are its lyrical style and inter-disciplinary analysis. It is accessible to a broad audience. However, for transitional justice practitioners or specialists, the lack of discussion of holistic justice is striking.<sup>3</sup> The book relies on responding to the South African model, and at times employs the dated dichotomy of retributive and restorative justice.<sup>4</sup> Because there is a siloed concentration on truth commissions, tones of romanticism towards truth-telling occasionally surface in the book.

This reverence for truth-telling is not necessarily misplaced. It helps lead to new and interesting questions about how truth commissions can embrace indigenous forms of truth-telling and begin to consider the environment as a victim/participant. It also challenges us as scholars to consider methods of analysis that are less forensic and more empathetic.

Overall, this book fills a gap in scholarship. Previously these truth-seeking processes in the region were usually studied in isolation. Now there is a credible reference for comparative analysis and practice.

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<sup>3</sup> Since 2010 the United Nations and many civil society organizations have pursued a policy of holistic justice, or a comprehensive approach. This policy requires a combination of responses to human rights atrocities that are not limited to either restorative or retributive approaches. This holistic approach was in many instances piloted in Timor-Leste, with simultaneous trials and multiple truth commissions. For further reference see, United Nations, *Guidance Note of the Secretary-General: United Nations Approach to Transitional Justice* (March 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Webster, *Flowers in the Wall*, 5-6. On pages 26-27 another chapter references a critique of the dichotomy, but it does not continue to a substantive discussion of how it applied in the region.