

## **The Timor-Leste Studies Association 2005-2015: The physical creation of a discipline**

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The 5<sup>th</sup> Timor-Leste Studies Association (TLSA) conference in Dili in July 2015 represented the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our area studies association. Founded in June 2005 by Helen Hill and Michael Leach, and a group of East Timorese and Australian scholars who attended a one-day academic symposium at Victoria University, the TLSA was launched as an ‘interdisciplinary, international research network focussed on all aspects of research into East Timorese society, including politics and history, economics, communications, health, language, agriculture and science.’

Far more significant developments would follow in July 2009, with the first of our biannual TLSA conferences at the National University of Timor Lorosa’e (UNTL) in Dili. In a multi-language format which respected and reflected the official and working languages of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, East Timorese researchers were joined by international delegates from around the globe to present papers in Tetun, Portuguese, English and Indonesian. The original 2009 organising committee of Antero da Silva (Tetun), Nuno Canas Mendes (Portuguese), Michael Leach (English) and Alarico da Costa Ximenes (Indonesian) would become the editors of these language sections in the conference publication to follow in 2010; with Bob Boughton editing the papers from a special stream he had organised on Adult and Popular Education.

This four-language format, combined with a special thematic stream, would become a regular feature of TLSA conferences, with another special stream on Adult & Popular Education in 2011 (ed. Bob Boughton); on ‘State, People and Peace Building From Below’ in 2013 (ed. Antero da Silva); and on ‘1975: 40 Years On’ in 2015 (ed. Clinton Fernandes). In each of the years following our conference, the TLSA has published a four-language refereed conference proceedings, which has been distributed free of charge to East Timorese universities, libraries and other education institutions. These have also been made freely available online.<sup>1</sup> In 2013, Hannah Loney became one of the key conference organisers, and editor of the English language papers. Aside from those mentioned above, other key contributors to organising the TLSA conferences over the years have included Marcos Amaral, Helen Hill, James Scambary, and Sarah Smith.

Throughout this time, UNTL has been the host and major co-sponsor of the TLSA conferences, providing venues, staff time, and logistical support. TLSA conferences would not have been possible without UNTL’s partnership and support, and particular thanks are due to the former Rector, Professor Aurelio Guterres. We also thank Swinburne University of Technology and the University of Lisbon for their active contributions. The TLSA has never sought nor received funding from the governments of Timor-Leste, Australia or Portugal to run its conferences, though it enjoys good relations with each, and is grateful to the Australian Embassy for hosting several of its conference receptions. Funding from the Office of the Presidency of the RDTL is a notable exception. The Presidency is an institution separate from and independent of the government of the RDTL; it sponsors its own excellent research and analysis department, and has also been a generous supporter of the TLSA since 2013. We take this opportunity to express our gratitude to the Office of the Presidency, with a particular acknowledgment of Josh Trindade, and to also thank The Asia Foundation (TAF) for its support of our 2013 conference. Finally, the TLSA’s longstanding collaboration with Victoria University and Helen Hill has seen the TLSA research conference linked with VU/UNTL development conferences in Dili on each occasion, allowing for a greater critical mass of scholars, NGO researchers and development professionals to attend both events.

### **The Evolution of the Timor-Leste Studies Association**

The 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the TLSA is a good occasion to reflect on the past decade, take stock of the present and assess the future. The TLSA is a non-hierarchical, decentralised network of scholars with a shared interest in Timor-Leste. Consisting of a biannual conference, a webpage, an

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://tlstudies.org/Publications.html>

email list, and a dedicated body of like-minded researchers, active chapters of the organisation exist in Dili, Lisbon, Melbourne, Darwin and Brasilia. Timor-Leste Studies is a type of area studies, with great internal heterogeneity; TLSA scholars have come from very diverse fields. The 255 papers published in the refereed conference proceedings from 2009 to 2015 cover a multiplicity of subjects such as agriculture, adult education, culture, food, gender, media, military history, identity, international relations, religion, resource economics, war crimes and many others. Thus, the TLSA brings together a group of distinct academic fields united by a shared commitment to understanding Timor-Leste. Shared commitment and scholarly diversity have typically resulted in the testing of grounded disciplinary research against detailed observation in Timor-Leste. It has also led to fruitful inter-disciplinary collaborations. Timor-Leste Studies also implies a shared interest, with varying degrees of intensity, in Timor-Leste's national and local histories, languages, people and cultures.

In one way, however, Timor-Leste Studies is unlike other fields of area studies. The TLSA was established in June 2005 by scholars who were themselves involved in the international solidarity campaign for independence. One of the reasons for founding the TLSA was to move Timor-Leste studies from the colonial setting of Indonesia studies, where it had, with a few honourable exceptions, been incorporated during the occupation. As such, the Association retains that campaign's ethos of friendship across borders, freedom of expression, self-determination, and opposition to illegitimate authority.

Such an ethos is manifest in four ways.

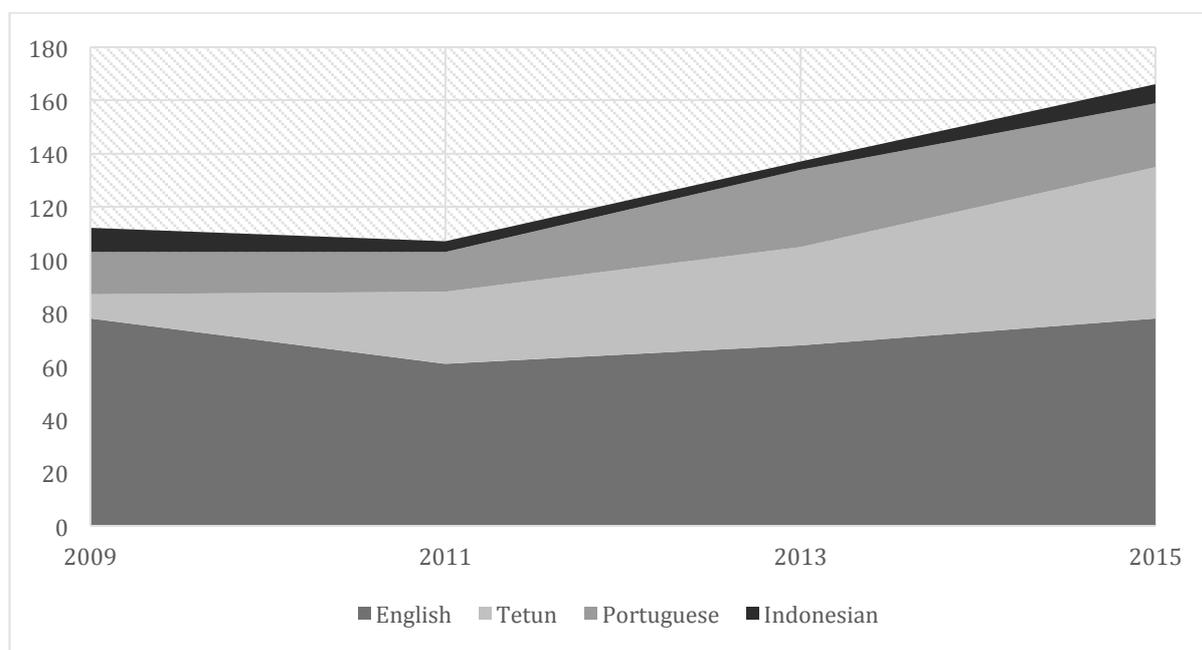
- (1) The TLSA has no hierarchy of language: papers are published in Tetun, Portuguese, English, and Indonesian. The TLSA believes that this is the best way to create an international community of scholarship.
- (2) The TLSA conference has no hierarchy of rank, in sharp contrast to the deferential demeanour shown by junior scholars to senior professors in some other disciplines. Papers are scheduled for delivery based on theme alone, students and senior academics mingle cheek-by-jowl, and robust debates are common regardless of seniority. There are no keynotes, nor opening addresses.
- (3) The TLSA prefers technical coordination to command authority. Scholars are encouraged to form their own panels and streams, and the Association tries to facilitate rather than dictate, as far as possible.
- (4) The TLSA has never been able to afford live translation, nor has it seen live translations as essential to a democratic and participatory research culture. Instead, the TLSA encourages its members to participate in other language panels by learning the official and working languages of Timor-Leste. Though this approach has sometimes been seen as controversial, and undoubtedly has drawbacks, we believe it places native English speakers on a level footing with non-English speakers, who are invariably required to accommodate foreign languages at academic conferences. This is a particular power-dynamic that governs much of the academic world, but is rarely named as such. The TLSA welcomes all attempts to deliver papers in a second language, no matter how haltingly, in the belief that it offers the more authentic path of intercultural communication.

### **Conference Presentations and Published Papers: 2009-15**

Table 1 shows the growth in papers presented at TLSA conferences in Dili since 2009. Alongside an overall trend to a larger conference, other features may be noted. Especially clear is the dramatic growth in the number of papers presented in Tetun since 2009, which has increased sixfold over the four conferences: from 9 papers in 2009, to 57 papers in 2015. The clear growth in Tetun-language scholarship is a very welcome development that contributes to Timor-Leste's nation-building project. Notably too, the conference has become less Anglophone over time, dropping from 69% of papers presented in English in 2009, to 57% in 2011, 49% in 2013, to 47% in 2015. Similarly, the percentage of papers presented in Timor-Leste's two official languages of Tetun and Portuguese has risen from 22% in 2009, to 39% in 2011, 48% in 2013, and 49% in 2015. The TLSA welcomes these trends as measures of an increasingly confident and assertive academic culture in Timor-Leste.

**Table 1**-Timor-Leste Studies Association conference – papers presented at conference

	<b>2009</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2015</b>
<b>English</b>	78	61	68	78
<b>Tetun</b>	9	27	37	57
<b>Portuguese</b>	16	15	29	24
<b>Indonesian</b>	9	4	3	7
<b>TOTAL</b>	112	107	137	166



In terms of published papers, growth has also been noticeable, if less dramatic. Table 2 details the languages of the four published conference proceedings. Here the dominance of the two European languages in academic publishing is more evident, though the number of Tetun papers published has certainly increased since 2009, and remains a strong priority for the TLSA. We have welcomed the feedback from UNTL scholars that published research on Timor-Leste has been especially valuable in teaching East Timorese students, irrespective of the language of publication.

**Table 2** - Timor-Leste Studies Association conference – published papers

	<b>2009</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2015</b>
<b>English</b>	31	40	39	43
<b>Tetun</b>	5	7	12	9
<b>Portuguese</b>	15	11	18	10
<b>Indonesian</b>	5	2	3	5
<b>TOTAL</b>	56	60	72	67

Since 2005, the TLSA has had the opportunity – rare among other disciplines – to physically create the field of Timor-Leste Studies – with a conference, webpage and email lists creating the infrastructure facilitating the more important building blocks of academic culture: students, supervisors, international networks, and new collaborations which build a culture of research excellence.

As this volume was being prepared, we learned of the passing of Benedict Anderson, a great scholar of nationalism and the most prominent Indonesia specialist to challenge American policy on East Timor. At our request, his friend and collaborator, Arnold Kohen, contributed a paper in his memory. We were delighted to read about ‘the real excitement in Ben’s voice when he learned of the existence of the Timor-Leste Studies Association’, and we share his view that ‘rigorous scholarship and critical analysis can play a pivotal role in helping Timor-Leste reach its potential in the years to come.’<sup>2</sup> The TLSA hopes to continue its contribution to the research culture of Timor-Leste, and to building a thriving association, both within Timor-Leste and internationally. We welcome and encourage the development of new ‘chapters’ of the Association in all parts of the world. On the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Association, we celebrate the creation of an area studies association for Timor-Leste.

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<sup>2</sup> See Arnold Kohen’s paper in this volume.