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The Challenges and Pleasures of a Comparative Fieldworkⁱ

Awet Tewelde Weldemichaelⁱⁱ

Abstract

Dissertation fieldwork involves a lot of risk and the number of cases one decides to study multiplies that risk. Apart from the expected challenges of the need for several languages and/or translators, funding and time, comparative fieldwork on contemporary issues involves more uncertainties that only blissful ignorance of them enables one to choose comparative doctoral research. Being an insider or an outsider to the research cases have inherent benefits and drawbacks that add to the challenges and pleasures of such a fieldwork. This paper is a brief recap of my fieldwork in Eritrea, East Timor and Portugal on the Eritrean and East Timorese liberation movements.

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Introduction

The months I spent doing research were as challenging as they were rewarding in many respects. More than field notes in the proper sense, the following pages are brief reflections on my fieldwork on the Eritrean and East Timorese liberation movements.

Eritrea and East Timor were integrated, dubiously, with Ethiopia (1952/62) and Indonesia (1975), respectively, after the departure of their European colonizers. The Eritrean and East Timorese peoples waged protracted struggles between 1961 and 1991 in Eritrea and from 1975 to 1999 in East Timor and successfully asserted their territorial independence. Nonetheless, despite similar processes and structural environments, the two movements adopted divergent grand strategies. Although the Eritrean and East Timorese nationalist revolutions combined different strategies at various stages, the main thrust of their grand strategies during the heyday of their struggles were significantly different from each other—one centering on the military and another on diplomatic/civil society endeavors. In addition to overcoming Ethiopian rule in Eritrea through armed struggle, the Eritrean movement fostered rebel movements within Ethiopia as “democratic alternatives” to the Ethiopian government¹ and launched them to power in Addis Ababa. In East Timor, however, despite initial military attempts to halt the Indonesian invasion, the independence movement increasingly concentrated on waging its case diplomatically in the international arena. It campaigned to win and indeed won the support of human rights groups and civil society organizations worldwide (including in Indonesia) and Indonesian reformists opposed to Suharto’s New Order.

Why did the East Timorese movement adopt a diplomacy-centered grand strategy when a similarly positioned liberation movement in Eritrea had successfully utilized a military-centered grand strategy? What explains such a profound contrast between these grand strategies and what is the implication of their differences to the states that emerged in independent Eritrea and East Timor?

In answering these questions, I started out with a stronger background on the Eritrean liberation movement and had completed my fieldwork on Eritrea before I started on East Timor. My fieldwork on the latter proved to be an unrelenting cycle of re-examination of the data that I newly acquired against my modest knowledge of the Eritrean case. It was, equally, cyclically unrelenting in that the new data I dug out on East Timor led me in new directions to approaching the data that I had gathered on Eritrea.

While being an insider to one of my cases and an outsider to the other comes with its pros and cons, conjunctures of events beyond my control facilitated my access to the archival data and the all-important interviews in both cases. At the same time, I had to peddle against those same conjunctures. From the very few expatriate-dominated Eritreanists, whose research has earned as much praise as scorn among Eritreans, I am one of the native Eritreans whose heavy interest and investment in Eritrean studies boosts the hope for local production of historical knowledge, valued by Eritreans across the political spectrum and most of whom were ready to assist my endeavors. The Rome-based Research and Information Center of Eritrea (RICE) relocated to Eritrea after independence to become the Research and Documentation Center (RDC) and currently houses most of the relevant documents on the Eritrean independence movement. I have been associated with the RDC since 1997 and my

respect for the Center's research etiquette and the cordial recourse I developed with its highly professional personnel proved helpful for my current research. Of no less weight was my affiliation with the University of Asmara, where I taught for one year and directed my students' research at the RDC.

The RDC has a big collection of Ethiopian documents which are still classified due to lack of expertise to sort the documents based on their sensitivities and a law to regulate declassification. At first, I did not understand why such a precious resource would be shut to researchers until I became one of three researchers to be granted access via an interlocutor who was the third researcher. One day, while I was discussing with the senior colleague who had access to the collection, the interlocutor, a respected officer in the Eritrean army, came to us with a pile of documents asking if we were interested in them. The files contained several documents with names of Ethiopian-hired Eritreans who killed other Eritreans for their advocacy for independence; some of the names were familiar and their children were certainly around. I automatically said that was not within the range of my research interest. We then started talking of how explosive it would be to grant public access to such documents without devising a mechanism to address any unexpected reaction; people may accept the death of their loved ones for a cause but the disclosure of who killed their family could have an unforeseen ripple-effect.² During my research at the RDC, I came across several such documents carrying the names of Eritrean spies for the Ethiopian rule. Usually, such documents were misplaced among the ones of interest to me and I chose to not read them beyond the point when I realized where they were headed. Controlling my researcher-instinct was very hard, but doing so was

rewarding: the confidence of knowing that one's activities were in line with the research etiquette of an institution and were not offending the inherent trust benefited my research.

During one of my several stopovers in Germany, one of my friends told me that there was a gentleman in town who knew a lot about Eritrean history and insisted I meet him. I was curious and after my friend's long introduction, I asked the gentleman if we could sit and talk some day. He gave me a look and pulled my friend aside. I overheard him say: "I don't know him enough, how do you expect me to talk to him?" He walked away and I did not try to pursue the case. He raised the most essential component for research: trust between researchers and their informants. Sometimes, that trust comes with the informants' knowledge of the researcher's previous work, of which I have almost none. Other times it comes with knowing the informants directly or through a chain of acquaintances. The strength of that chain determines the willingness of the informants to speak to the researcher and, if they are willing, their level of openness.

During these years, I have cultivated personal contacts and support from highly respected individuals and institutions that have afforded me the full-hearted cooperation of my interviewees. In Eritrea, the latter ranged from civilian auxiliaries to rank-and-file independence fighters and cadres to the highest-ranking leaders of the previous movement and current government of Eritrea. Although rare, this access occasionally came at the cost of raising suspicion in and getting outright rejections from some Eritreans in the diasporic opposition to the government in Asmara.

When I taught at the University of Asmara in 2002, I made it my goal to start changing the inhibition among

vast Eritreans to retell their experiences and sensitize them to the need to open up before it is too late. So I gave my fourth year students a take-home final exam that required them to conduct interviews and archival research. During the process of doing the research, while a few of my students were frowned upon and others questioned about who was raising those questions, one of my students had a gun pulled on her face by an army officer who demanded her to leave his office.³ My students had less than a week to answer their respective questions and so they had to jump right into the question when they met their potential informants, which aroused the suspicion of the informants. I was lucky enough to not have faced any of that for I spent more time making mental notes of names, places and events that came up in social gatherings and formal meetings. I had also been conducting the research longer and socialized around politically engaged personalities long enough to gauge individual and collective tempers on any given issue relevant to my research. When I asked my Eritrean informants "sensitive" questions, they either brushed it off or politely reminded me that time was not ripe for one or another of the sensitive issues to be raised.

I arrived in East Timor with virtually no contacts as far as research assistants and interlocutors are concerned. Nonetheless, among a humble and generous people who are grateful for the global citizen outcry on their behalf, not only was I welcome in East Timor but also readily supported by individuals and institutions. I was not one of the stakeholders in the rivalry among personalities and political parties, neither was I identified with any, which put all of my Timorese interviewees at ease. I stayed in East Timor through the worst phase of the crisis the country was embroiled in around mid-2006. In March 2006, 593 soldiers of the country's army of 1400

were dismissed for going absent without leave (AWOL) over alleged discrimination in their barracks. With their case unresolved, they went on a five-day demonstration in front of the Government Palace. The country's security apparatus had long started to fracture and the state seemed on the brink of collapse. Exiting from such an evil path was to be a test to my hypothesis that the grand strategy of the Timorese independence movement had given birth to a fledgling democracy. So I stopped archival research and started to follow the developments on the ground on a daily basis.

At the end of the five-day demonstrations on 28 April 2006, things spun out of control with some civilian supporters of the demonstrators breaking through the thin line of anti-riot police, breaking window glasses of the Government Palace and setting several cars ablaze. Several demonstrators were shot with live munitions, leaving some dead. Watching BBC and ABC-Australia broadcasts of the events of that day, I concluded that their cameras must have been over a hundred meters behind me. I could not believe that my worst fear was coming true and I was watching it from the center. As the Timorese Police (PNTL) seemed non-functional, the remaining active units of the country's army was called in to restore order at which point the dismissed soldiers retired to their home districts and their civilian supporters fled the capital to avoid the army.

I believed that if the East Timorese resistance managed to drive a wedge between the Indonesian occupiers and their Western backers and broke the resolve of the Indonesian military to become independent, its leaders who now lead the independent republic would snap out of their path to self-destruction. I was depressingly wrong. In the following tense days and weeks, rumors

floated around which exacerbated the rift between "Easterners" and "Westerners." A chain of interconnected incidents led to the 25 May army attack of the police who had been disarmed by and placed under the protection of the UN. The shooting continued for what seemed a lifetime to US Embassy employee friend of mine who was caught in the crossfire. At 12:21 pm, she wrote me a text message saying: "I'm in the middle of gunfire in Caicoli [neighborhood]. I'm very scared. Brother, I want to get out of here." I was only half a mile away but that seemed half a world away. One of the friends who was with us at my hotel room just received a word that her nephew may have been shot. At 2:05 I received a text message from another friend who works for a petroleum company: "My Korean staff got shot and I'm at the hospital." We headed to the biggest hotel in the country, Timor Hotel, to get any fresher updates when one of my friends got confirmation that her nephew was in the hospital. She rushed to the hospital alone and a short while afterwards she wrote us: "I've found my nephew, he got shot on both of his legs and I'm at the hospital now donating blood for him. The hospital is running out of bloodstock. There is one Filipino [UN] soldier who got shot as well. The hospital is full of injured and dead people. Four F-FDTL [soldiers of the Defense Forces of Timor-Leste] fully armed came here 20 minutes ago in a big civilian truck with 18 civilians armed with machetes and knives." We had just decided to go to the hospital to donate blood when I received another text message from the same friend: "Don't come! They are shooting! DON'T COME!" I did not tell my friends of that text message and we went ahead and donated blood. The scene reminded me of my April 1999 visit to an Eritrean military hospital during the 1998-2000 Eritrea-Ethiopia border war. As the East Timorese

security apparatus fell apart and the state started to unravel, UN and other bilateral international security forces were called in to salvage whatever was left.

However legitimate, the East Timorese belligerents had explanations to their state of affairs but I could not find a reason why for over a month I would be so engrossed in it. I could not blame anyone but I was very angry and my anger was apparent in my interaction with the only friends who had not evacuated. There has not been a sadder reminder that it was time for me to leave as well; the next day, I drove through Dili's tense streets to get an Indonesian VISA and buy an air ticket. Once in Bali, my anger evolved to depression. I had been struck by what people call the *Timorese spell* in good days. I could not go back to the US, I needed some closure but at the same time, I could not go back to Dili before knowing I was in control of my emotions and the security situation there was improving. After about a month in Indonesia, I went back to East Timor and spent three politically turbulent weeks that would take the country years to recover from.

Although my return to Dili benefited my research, the reality on the ground had long torn to pieces my original thesis. Yet, the conflict was a double-edged sword for my research. On the one hand, Timorese frustration and agony in the immediate post-crisis weeks helped some of my interviewees overcome their inhibitions and my research benefited from the absence of self-censorship. On the other hand, some important informants did not want to talk about the past and reveal any evidence that might incriminate one or another of the belligerents during those chaotic weeks. Government and military officials were almost impossible to access due to understandable reasons. Moreover, a huge number of civilians fled their

homes to become internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Dili or in their home districts. Not only did tracking down potential interviewees become difficult and morally discomfoting, but also several government offices were closed down. As a result, the *Arquivo e Musuio Resistencia Timorencia* in Dili was closed as was the post-CAVR (Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in East Timor) offices where CAVR's very rich archives are housed.

With the pool of interviewees shrinking and the archives of interest to me completely inaccessible, I headed to Portugal. The *Fundação Mario Soares* in Lisbon is the patron of Dili's *Arquivo e Musuio Resistencia* and not only digitized the latter's documents but also has in its possession the entire collection of original documents. I arrived in Portugal in August, which is when almost the entire country is on vacation. Nonetheless, the Foundation's directorate was understanding of my situation and granted me unlimited entry during the usual working hours when, in fact, the archives were officially closed.

The timing of my research coincided with the start of Portuguese leaders' opening up on their individual and collective roles in the Timorese resistance. While this willingness may have facilitated access to my interviewees' stored knowledge, the contacts of my influential friends helped me to get in touch with the relevant personalities. These friends' phone calls on my behalf paved my way to the highest circles of Portuguese political and diplomatic leadership. Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Prime Minister, and President, Dr. Mario Soares came to his office in the middle of his summer break to meet with me. He was Portugal's chief negotiator with the liberation movements in the former African

colonies during the latter's bid for independence. Dr. Soares said that East Timor was not of concern to the Portuguese politicians of the time mainly because it had not caused as much financial drain or cost Portuguese families the lives of their loved ones. His successor, former President Jorge Sampaio, granted me an interview during the only day he had in Lisbon before he traveled as UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's Envoy for the Eradication of Malaria in Africa. My meetings with key diplomats, advisors and other personalities were similarly facilitated. While my Timorese contacts put me in touch with important Timorese personalities in the diaspora, the latter introduced me to Indonesian and Portuguese personalities in Portugal. The chain made a pleasant full circle when I was put in touch with the staunch advocate of Timorese human rights and the 1996 Nobel Peace co-Laureate, Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo, who had just arrived in Portugal from Mozambique. While I traversed Portugal in pursuit of people to interview, I talked to ordinary Portuguese citizens of various levels of understanding and knowledge about the East Timor story. Some of these citizens told me that Portuguese leaders, including Dr. Mario Soares, knew nothing about East Timor, while others reminisced their expression of solidarity with the people of the former colony during their final days under Indonesian occupation in 1999. Interestingly enough, some of the latter were surprised to know that East Timor was finally an independent country: their waving of white pieces of cloth on their windows had paid off and they did not know about it.⁴

Rumors/gossip pose an entertaining challenge for research on contemporary issues. In post-conflict situations, among societies that have survived oppressive and repressive regimes, they are exceptionally appealing.

The governments abuse the media to misinform the public, while opposition rebel movements and particularly their clandestine cells, use rumors to give their version of the truth and to distract government attention away from their activities. As the full picture of any story emerged in pieces and bits from the rumors and the official media, the two become equally reliable sources of information with rumors' added advantage for they circulate faster at no cost and often times to/from people who knew each other beforehand. Doing research in rumor-incubating post-conflict environments, one has to brace up for the challenge of confirming rumors before making conclusions. Going with the flow to enjoy receiving and passing rumors and trying to verify their authenticity as a researcher were not particularly easy. While excessive adoption of the former can lead to flawed conclusions, the latter is likely to cast one away from his/her network of friends, something a researcher ill-affords to do.

Being an insider in Eritrea, I knew who to contact to confirm rumors circulated through "03", the unofficial name for the rumor machine in the country. East Timor, however, was unlike what I have experienced before. The country's President Xanana Gusmão once said: "had rumors been exportable, East Timor would be the richest country in the world." In my historian-mindset, I asked my friends, Timorese and non-Timorese alike, questions about rumors they brought me: who said them, when, to whom, what were the circumstances and what was the reaction... Not only did I annoy them greatly, but I also spoiled the inherent excitement of rumor-hype. They often shouted at me: "can you stop being a historian for one day... and enjoy gossiping?" I often shouted back: "I can't, that's what I do!"

Several well-intentioned individuals advised me to avoid a comparative research for a PhD dissertation. Although I do not regret listening to my instincts, it took me conducting a comparative fieldwork to fully agree with their advice. On the one hand, apart from the practical challenges—the need for several languages and/or translators in each case, funding and time—the risk of fieldwork grows bigger with the number of cases to be studied. When either or all of the cases are politically volatile, the risks change and the struggle against them becomes one for survival. On the other hand, as essential as it is, it takes an audacity that borders awkwardness to ask an informant through a translator if he/she could put you in touch with a person mentioned during an interview. In a small country like East Timor, where everyone knows everyone, the researcher has to weigh which contacts are better to put you in touch with another potential informant based on the status and political orientation of both. Whose house one goes to and who he/she hangs out with most also carry some weight in determining who would say “ok” for an interview or offer access to one’s personal archives. All these challenges notwithstanding, comparative fieldwork is a rewarding experience that I would not hesitate to do again.

Endnotes

¹ Voice of the Broad Masses (Radio of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front), “The EPLF and its Relationship with the Democratic Movements in Ethiopia,” (Tigrigna) 31 January-2 February 1985. Available at Eritrea’s Research and Documentation Center in Asmara.

² One of my acquaintances, who knew that I research the Eritrean independence war, once asked me if I knew someone.

I remembered the name to be one of those killed during an internal schism of one of the resistance organizations. He said that was his first uncle and he wanted to know, 'from an objective point of view', what exactly happened to him. I told him what he already knew but said I did not know any further detail, and indeed I didn't. But the implication is very clear; had I known more I would have needed to be responsible enough as to not scratch his wound without betraying my ethical duty to be truthful. This challenge is particularly acute in Eritrea where, unlike in East Timor, there has been no national reconciliation whereby the stakeholders came out clean through forgiveness or justice. Instead, once the winners of the war assumed power, the rest (dead or alive) became either 'losers' or 'historically wrong' for heckling the 'correct path.' Not only does this make a researcher feel like walking on eggshells but most importantly it threatens the long-term cohesion of the society.

³ I am grateful to the history-conscious government officials and leaders of the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) in whose offices my students lined up for a chance to raise their questions and who were of enormous assistance to my students.

⁴ In the wake of the 1999 referendum in East Timor, when over 75 percent of the population voted to break from Indonesia and become independent, the angry pro-integration militias and the Indonesian military ravaged the country. Portuguese advocates for East Timor organized back-to-back demonstrations of solidarity that brought tens of thousands of Lisboans to the streets of Lisbon accompanied by month-long hanging of white piece of cloth on the citizens' doors and windows.