

Oecusse and the Sultanate of Occussi-Ambeno: Pranksterism, Misrepresentation and Micronationality

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Abstract: Occussi-Ambeno, a fictional sultanate initially conceived by Aotearoan/New Zealander anarchist artist Bruce Grenville in 1968 and represented and developed by him and others over the last fifty years, is notable as both an early example of a *virtual* micronation (i.e. a type that does not attempt to enact itself within the physical territory it claims) and as an entity affixed to an entire pre-existent territory (in the case of the Sultanate of Occussi-Ambeno, that of Oecusse on the north-west coast of the island of Timor). The latter aspect is pertinent in that however imaginary the micronation is, its association with a region of a small state raises questions concerning the ethics of (mis)representation. This is particularly pertinent in the case of Oecusse, which was occupied by Indonesian forces in 1975 and had its distinct identity subsumed within the Indonesian state until Timor-Leste (and Oecusse as its exclave) successfully gained independence in 2002. Discussions in the article compare the anarcho-pranksterist impulse behind the creation of the Sultanate of Occussi-Ambeno and its manifestation in visual media – primarily through the design and production of ‘artistamps’ (faux postage stamps) – to related economic and socio-political contexts.

Keywords: artistamps, Indonesia, micronation, misrepresentation, Occussi-Ambeno, Oecusse, Portugal, Timor, Timor Leste

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Introduction

Micronations are, most commonly, imagined entities that result from an individual or small group of individuals claiming a (usually) small area of land as independent from the nation state that encloses it (despite the minimal likelihood of the micronation being recognised by the nation in question or by any other nation or international body). As such, micronations are distinct from very small or microstates (such as Monaco, Tuvalu or Grenada) which are internationally recognised as independent entities.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of micronations. The first might be understood to be ‘classic’ examples, which have involved people attempting to create autonomous states in: either (1) isolated marine locales, as in the case of Sealand, established on an abandoned anti-aircraft platform in the North Sea off the coast of Britain (Dennis, 2002; Grimmelmann, 2012); or (2) in inland locations, such as the Principality of Hutt River, an inland area in Western Australia (de Castro and Kober, 2018).

The second type are ‘virtual’ ones. Some of the latter lay a vague claim to actual territories (with a manifest lack of concern for the manner in which they represent actual regions as something other than what they are). Often these claims are not known by the inhabitants and/or authorities of these islands or, when they are, are met with puzzled indifference. In some cases, such as Lundy, off the north coast of the English county of Devon, the actual island has been subject to both a series of ‘classic’ micronational gestures and, more recently, the establishment of a virtual micronation that has no intersection with previous micronational projects or the island’s current society (Hayward & Khamis, 2015). Traversing these polarities, a number of artists have also created micronations as projects that address various issues of autonomy, socio-political critique and/or artistic expressions. These range from those constituted in actual locations over an extended duration, such as Ladonia, the wilderness art-space created by Lars Vilks in south-eastern Sweden (de Castro & Kober, 2019), to short-term installations, such as Western Australian artist Jesse Lee Johns’s New Bayswater installation at the inaugural Freemantle Biennale in 2017 (Hayward, 2018).

Scholarly interest in the principles and practice of micronationality has burgeoned in recent years (e.g. the regularly updated *Shima* online anthology 2019). Yet, one significant project has been largely overlooked: the Sultanate of Occussi-Ambeno (henceforth SO-A) (1968-present). The SO-A originated in Aotearoa/New Zealand as a parody of statehood, concocted by a group of cultural pranksters led by artist Bruce Henderson, who adopted the surname Grenville from 1981 onwards before reverting to Henderson around 2000. I refer to him throughout as Grenville, reflecting the name he used in the texts written by him that I refer to in this article.

SO-A is notable for having an actual referent territory, the 814 km² region currently known as Oecusse on the north-west coast of the island of Timor ([Figure 1](#)). The constitution of the fanciful micronation of SO-A within the cartographic – if not actual – space of Oecusse was inspired by and reflects the particular character of that location (Grenville, 1985, p. 15): it was initially a Portuguese imperial territory located in the western portion of Timor that formed part of the Dutch empire until 1949; then as a Portuguese enclave within independent Indonesia (1949-1975); then as a cultural and religious (Roman Catholic) enclave occupied by and incorporated into Indonesia in 1975-1999; and, most recently as an exclave of an independent Timor-Leste (East Timor) located within Indonesia. Throughout these transitions, Oecusse has maintained a distinct identity (Meitzner Yoder, 2016) that is currently manifest through its status as a special administrative region within Timor-Leste (Meitzner Yoder, 2015).

Figure 1: Island of Timor, showing Oecusse (tagged), which occupies the same territorial area as that claimed for the Sultanate of Occussi-Ambeno. (Google Maps, 2019).



Exclaves

Since 2002, Oecusse qualifies as an enclave of the independent state of Timor Leste: its land and sea borders are completely surrounded by the land and maritime zones of a different country (in this case, Indonesia) (Lundén, 2012).

Exclaves exist in various parts of the planet as:

- accidental consequences of drawing straight line borders across complex topographies and/or coastlines (e.g. the US exclave of Point Roberts within the Canadian province of British Columbia);
- a result of fragmented spheres of colonial influence that involved small pockets of land being administratively attached to nearby colonies and, later, independent nation-states (e.g. Kabinda, an Angolan exclave surrounded on three sides by the Republic of the Congo);
- a result of the break-up of areas of large nations at particular stages (such as Kaliningrad, which is part of Russia, after Lithuania's secession from the USSR);
- a result of established nation states purchasing external territories from other states (e.g. the US purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867).

The defining aspects of exclaves are their administration by larger, dislocated territories and the complexities of transport access, trade and service provisions with the states that administer them. In particular instances, the limitations and inflexibilities of such arrangements has led to the successful secession of the latter from the former (such as East Pakistan's secession from the state of Pakistan, centred in its western territory, in 1971 and its reconstitution as the independent nation of Bangladesh). As such, the exclave is a perpetually

problematic entity: an exception to the notion of sovereign states as territorially coherent and contiguous. Given that the vast majority of the world's (terrestrial) surface is claimed by states, micronations have tended to be pronounced on small, remote islands and/or offshore reefs or platforms conceived of as being outside and beyond the jurisdiction (and perhaps purview and interest) of established states (*Shima* anthology, 2019); or else in enclaves within existing state borders. Grenville's SO-A represents an unusual example of a micronation identifying itself as existing within the entire space of a pre-existent exclave.

The Creation and Performance of The Sultanate of Occussi-Ambeno

Bruce Grenville's imagination and creation of SO-A reflect his early engagement with a socio-cultural and political milieu that combined elements of anarchism and libertarian socialism in a manner that can be characterised as "a relatively new and influential form of politics" (Boraman, 2007, p. vi). Boraman (2007, p. vii) argued that,

[Grenville] sought to combine protest with having fun. They were rabble rousers and merry pranksters. They rejected the dour puritanism of the traditional left, and instead took an imaginative, carnivalesque and joyous approach to politics. At best, they mixed the libertarian socialist emphasis on fomenting a class-based revolution from below with the counter-cultural emphasis on individual transformation and self-expression.

Grenville has identified his imagination (and subsequent representation and promotion) of SO-A as operating within this broad project and as representing a humorous critique of nation-statehood that drew on his youthful interest in alternative postal systems and philately in the late 1960s (Sør-Reime, 2016a, p.11-13). In his 1985 essay 'Occussi-Ambeno: A Modern Satirical State,' he outlined that,

To anarchists, the idea of something as bizarrely improbable as "The State" actually being taken seriously by most of the dwellers on this planet, would elicit considerable humour were it not so lethal an institution. Because of this and intrigued by the opportunities that could be provided to parody the State, several comrades and I set up an imaginary State in 1968 (Grenville, 1985, p.17).

Grenville's initial discussion of SO-A refers to it variously as "parody" of statehood and as a "state" (ibid) and he later adopted a characterisation used by early exponents of such imaginary entities, referring to it as a "Fifth World state". While the latter term was in circulation in the 1980s and 1990s it has now been largely superseded by the term 'micronation', which is used throughout this article. Reflecting on 17 years of SO-A's operation, Grenville asserted that,

...the doors that are opened have to be experienced to be believed. The confusion that you can throw into the already complex world geopolitical scene is also fun. We feel that every possible unorthodox vehicle should be explored in the fight for freedom from not taken into account at all (1985, p. 19).

The ‘confusion’ he refers to resulted from the manifestation of the micronation through two principal forms: pseudo-national communications that were circulated to various international press agencies and the production and marketing of postage stamps. While these practices emerged as key planks of SO-A’s identity, Grenville has characterised them as having been something of an afterthought to the initial conceptualisation of SO-A as an ‘effigy’ of statehood,

During its time of ‘existence’, Occussi-Ambeno’s actions have been rather mind-boggling and have far exceeded in scope what any of the founders ever dreamed. Voluminous quantities of paperwork have been generated and all sorts of people have become entranced with the concept, got involved and contributed their particular talents to the enterprise (Grenville, 1985, p. 17).

In order to enhance SO-A’s micronational credibility, Grenville and his collaborators created a “back-story”, including its point of origin in 1848, when “seven tribes united for protection from the interloping Portuguese” (1985, p. 17) and with independence from the colonial ruler being achieved in 1968 (the year Grenville first imagined SO-A into existence). Complicating the micronational narrative, SO-A also publicised a sub-plot to its national emergence: in 1969, inspired by Biafra’s attempted (but failed) secession from Nigeria in 1967-70, SO-A ran a scenario in which Quatair, one of SO-A’s seven provinces, was taken over by Marxists who attempted to secede before being overwhelmed by the national militia. Further drama was added to the micronational story in 1983 when it was announced that the government of Feripaega province had abolished itself after devolving all its functions to neighbourhood councils (1985, p. 18). Using SO-A’s back-story to bolster various pronouncements, a group of Aotearoa/New Zealand based supporters ran a micronational press agency (entitled Markpress News Feature Service) that airmailed Xeroxed press releases to international news agencies and media outlets concerning developments in SO-A, which Grenville notes “were often picked up by the media and published” (1985, p. 17). Many of these stories involved futuristic/Green/Utopian elements of SO-A’s imagined statehood, including:

- Low pollution transport: with SO-A’s national shipping line, Transonic Marine, represented as using wind-powered solar power engines; and with its national airline, Swiftair, using helium-filled airships;
- Solar powered desalination systems that processed sea water, pumped it inland and produced salt for refining;
- Opposition to nuclear weapons testing;
- Legalised drug use, resulting in a successful hallucinogenic mushroom and marijuana production industries; and
- A cultural tolerance for, and encouragement of, bisexuality.

Many of the above aspects were commemorated in the most visible manifestation of SO-A’s existence: the production of (pseudo-) postage stamps. During the early-mid 1970s members of SO-A began to produce faux stamps (i.e. ones that had no utility as guarantors of postage as SO-A did not exist as an actual state with a postal service) that found their way into the hands of international collectors. As Sør-Reime (2016a) has documented, the first SO-A

stamps (issued in 1967-69) simply overprinted existing Indonesian ones with text identifying them as the product of SO-A. The first original SO-A stamps, the so-called ‘Stoned Bears’ series (issued in 1969-72) (Sør-Reime, 2016a, p.15) were playful and highly artisanal in appearance (featuring sewing-machine perforations around their edges). These were the first of what have been referred to by as Grenville as “artistamps” (collating the terms ‘artist’ and ‘stamps’) (Figure 2). Production standards improved for a commemorative set issued in 1973 featuring famous men from European history rendered in red on a white background, and a set of anti-nuclear stamps followed in 1976. This modest philatelic enterprise reaped an unexpected bounty in 1977 when a European philatelic marketing company named Philanumismatica based in Madrid contacted SO-A’s New Zealand/Aotearoa office,

... offering substantial graft payments if we would induce the Sultan to sign a contract giving them the exclusive rights to produce and sell Occussi-Ambeno stamps to collectors throughout the planet. Obviously, we were quite happy to be subsidised by the rich in this manner, which also upgraded our stamps from single-colour letterpress productions to being full-colour glossy offset designs. The consortium produced several designs over the next year: medieval sailing ships, Asian birds and airships being among the best. We were paid about \$US 40,000 as graft on these stamps, and as well, made a considerable income from selling our portions to collectors (Grenville, 1985, pp. 17-18).

While Henderson’s deal with the company proved short-lived, the company continued to produce and market its own stamps for SO-A until 1984 (Sør-Reime, 2016a, p. 20). Sales to individual collectors (some of whom, at least, may have been aware of the fictional nature of SO-A) has continued and Henderson’s stamps are still available today from the Ocussi-Ambeno Philatelic Bureau (which operates from a PO Box in Auckland). Using proceeds from the sale of S-OA stamps, Grenville set up an anarchist printing press in the late 1970s and later went on to found libertarian-anarchist periodical *The State Adversary* in 1987.¹ Production of SO-A stamps continued to the 2000s, with these being sold (or otherwise circulated) in ‘mint’ (i.e. unfranked) versions, or else combined with New Zealand stamps (to ensure acceptance for postal delivery), on envelopes that also carry other stamped designations of SO-A identity (Figure 2).

During the 1970s, SO-A moved to consolidate its micronational status by attempting to establish diplomatic relations with established microstates such as Monaco and Liechtenstein and claimed to have been included on a list of countries compiled by the US Department of State in a similar period (Chiefa Coins, 2015, online). SO-A also attracted media attention in Aotearoa/New Zealand in 1973 when it established formal diplomatic relations with a different kind of micronational enterprise, the short-lived Republic of Minerva (Grenville, 1985, p. 17). The latter was an attempt by American millionaire Michael Oliver to establish a libertarian society on an uninhabited coral reef some 435 km west of Tonga’s Tongatapu islands. After depositing sand on the reef and constructing rudimentary buildings in 1971, the republic was declared in January 1972 (although no continuing population was established). Tonga mounted a counter-claim for the reef that was recognised by other regional powers and dispatched an expeditionary party to assert its control. While another party of American libertarians landed on the reef in 1982 and attempted to reassert the republic, the Tongan military removed them soon after their arrival and further micronational settlement has not been attempted.

¹ For more on Grenville’s activities as a publisher and activist, see Boraman (2007, pp. 119-120).

Figure 2: Front cover of letter featuring SO-A and New Zealand stamps sent to the author by Bruce Grenville in June 2019 (NZ stamps at bottom left side of image).



Source: the author.

Grenville's general interest in promoting other micronational projects has dovetailed with his crypto-philatelic enterprise through his involvement in designing and producing stamps for virtual micronations such as The Republic of Kemp Land which was re-named as the "Gay Republic of..." in 2015 (and now appears online under this name) (Gay Republic of Kemp Land, 2016) and the Free Vinland Republic (whose back story identifies it as a former north Atlantic colony of SO-A).

Misrepresentation

Writing of the SO-A project in 1985, Grenville identified the "confusion" that it threw "into the already complex geopolitical scene" as "fun" (1985, p. 17), confirming its alignment to the broad project of 1960s' anarcho-libertarianism that Boraman characterised as "an imaginative, carnivalesque and joyous approach to politics" undertaken by a band of "rabble rousers and merry pranksters" (2007, p. vii). Accurate as these characterisations may have been with regard to the SO-A team's activities in particular socio-cultural spheres, the relationship between SO-A and its actual referent geo-political entity/area, Oecusse, appears to have received little attention. More specifically, the SO-A project may be perceived to have been based on appropriation and/or 'identity theft'. The first characterisation is an accurate description of the manner in which a group of 'pranksters' took the name and referent geographical space of a pre-existent subnational region, without seeking any approval from the region's administration or inhabitants and used it: representing themselves as its officers, concocting colourful stories about its past and present activities and issuing – and profiting from – faux postage stamps. 'Identity theft' is a more recent term that primarily signifies economic fraud and/or the disablement of an individual's identity in a manner that undermines their capacity to act as the individual they actually are. While any characterisation of SO-A's operation in terms of the latter is more tendentious than the former, it is pertinent to contrast the history of SO-A in the period 1968-present to that of Oecusse.

At the time of SO-A's creation in 1968, Oecusse was a neglected Portuguese colonial enclave in which a substantial percentage of the population followed traditional subsistence livelihood patterns and practised Roman Catholicism. When the *Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente* (Fretilin) declared independence from Portuguese colonial rule for Timor-Leste in 1975, the Indonesian military took advantage of the absence of either Portuguese or Fretilin forces in Oecusse and quickly invaded it, subjecting the local population to harassment and intimidation and forcibly relocating individuals to other parts of the island. Similar to their colonial predecessors, Indonesia neglected the local community, investing markedly less in infrastructure and education in Oecusse than in other areas of Timor, with a result that literacy levels in Oecusse in 2001 were "still only 31 per cent, following twenty-four years of Indonesian education" (Holthouse & Grenfell, 2008, p. 10). During this period, the local population were unable to profit from any aspect of their region's name or identity: financial flows resulting from SO-A's arrangements with philatelic companies and/or individual collectors were entirely disconnected from occupied Oecusse. The region experienced fresh trauma when sustained violence occurred after a referendum on independence for Timor-Leste was held in August 1999 that resulted in a substantial majority vote in favour of secession in Oecusse (Meitzner Yoder, 2015, p. 304). Pro-Indonesia militias, supported by the Indonesian military, retaliated by carrying out attacks throughout Oecusse, including massacres at Tumin and Maquelab villages, where around 150 people died. As Holthouse and Grenfell also identified,

Nearly all Oecusse's public buildings were destroyed, along with some two thirds of homes. The electrical and water systems were dismantled and removed to west Timor. Other stolen items included metal roofing, solar panels and vehicles (2008, p. 10).

As a result of deaths and the flight of residents, the population of the region declined from 55,132 in 1996 to 45,042 in 2001 (Meitzner Yoder, 2005, p. 23). Since its re-integration into an independent Timor-Leste in 2002, Oecusse has remained "a neglected peripheral district rarely visited by national government officials and poorly accessible by land, sea, or air to would-be visitors" (Meitzner Yoder, 2015, p. 302) and has experienced,

... persistent difficulties in improving basic human development indicators and remains low in national rankings... Fully 46.6% of the Oecusse population is in the lowest household wealth quintile, by far the highest of any district. Oecusse also remains at the bottom nationally in literacy and at the top in teenage pregnancy... (Meitzner Yoder, 2015, pp. 302-303).

I summarise this history to contrast the colourful, pranksterist trajectory of SO-A and the Aotearoan/New Zealander volunteers who contributed to its various manifestations with the grounded reality of communities in SO-A's referent region. It is notable, for instance, that of all the topics that might have been considered suitable for commemoration on SO-A 'artistamps' following the Indonesian invasion of Oecusse and the whole of East Timor in 1975, it was the Bicentennial of the American Revolution that was depicted on a set issued in February 1976 and, similarly, despite the massive violence and disruption occurring in 1999, sets of SO-A stamps issued in the early 2000s principally focussed on subjects such as flying vehicles.

The lack of any reference to Oecusse's plight in SO-A stamps might be interpreted to reflect anarcho-libertarian principles that eschewed traditional leftist solidarity with postcolonial causes. Other aspects of Grenville's artistamp activity, however, complicate this interpretation. In the late 1970s, Grenville temporarily relocated to Australia and produced stamps for two organisations promoting regional secession from Indonesia: the Republic Maluku Selatan (RMS) government-in-exile and the Organasi Papua Merdeka (OPM) (Sør-Reime, 2016b, pp. 63-64). Following the failure of South Maluku forces to secure independence from Indonesia in 1950, an RMS government-in-exile was established, initially in Seram – where RMS militants maintained a base until 1963 – and subsequently in the Netherlands, from 1966 on, where former RMS combatants and their families were resettled. RMS' activists maintained their campaign and militant activities reached a peak in 1979 when media coverage of a group of activists hijacking a train in Holland gave their cause international prominence. Grenville's contribution to the RMS was less dramatic, involving the modification of 1950s stamps for the RMS government in-exile, but he was nevertheless supportive of their enterprise. His artistamps for the OPM were also produced in liaison with the organisation and comprise the overprinting of Papua New Guinean stamps. His engagement with these two organisations actively involved in conflict with Indonesia makes his and the SO-A's eschewal of political engagement with Oecusse over an extended period all the more marked. In response to this author's inquiry as to the ethics of misrepresenting Oecusse, he stated that,

I have never had any qualms about having the Sultanate located in an actual territory. Of course, when OA began in 1968 no one had ever heard of Timor, much less of our exotic enclave! (Bruce Grenville, personal communication, 22nd May 2019).

This statement is obviously problematic in two regards. First, that the “no one” referred to appears to refer to New Zealanders and/or other Westerners (with Timor's population – and that of the immediate region – certainly having “heard of” their island community); and second, that after the Indonesian invasion of East Timor (and Oecusse), the region was prominently covered in the New Zealand media. Indeed, with specific regard to New Zealand, the continuance of the fantasy sultanate of SO-A after the Indonesian invasion of the actual territory of Oecusse – without any reference to the latter in any SO-A communication or representation – has affinities with the New Zealand government's low-profile acquiescence to the Indonesian takeover of East Timor itself (Hubbard, 2015). In neither case was any meaningful gesture of support offered.

Conclusion

The discussions developed in this article identify the distinct operations of a virtual micronation and its referent geo-social entity during a period in which the latter experienced episodes of significant violence and trauma. In this regard, it can be argued that Oecusse's experience as an enclave of an imperial nation state (Portugal), as an exclave of an emergent nation state (Timor Leste), as a territory occupied by a third nation state (Indonesia), and then as an exclave of a newly independent nation state – all within the brief space of a 45 year period – has provided an incisive perspective on the fraught and problematic nature of statehood (and its contestations) as much as being the butt of the satire of statism pursued by Grenville and the SO-A (Meitzner Yoder, 2016). Oecusse can be perceived as doubly victimised in this scenario, with the appropriation of its name and cartographic space by SO-A over an extended duration occurring a period when the identity of its community was suppressed and marginalised by Indonesia.

Adding insult to injury, there was also a proposal by Australian researcher Andrew MacIntyre, as late as 2003, that Timor-Leste should withdraw claims to sovereignty over its exclave in order to gain favourable concessions from Indonesia on other matters. Characterising Oecusse as both a high-cost “historical anomaly” and “outpost” of West Timor – and completely overlooking the distinct socio-cultural nature of the community – he suggested that its low population density and minor economic significance rendered it an eminently disposable asset (MacIntyre, 2003, pp. 225-226). The detrimental effect of both MacIntyre’s and SO-A’s misrepresentation of Oecusse and its community may have been symbolic, rather than economic or political. Nevertheless, SO-A’s satirical play with Oecusse’s identity is striking for the manner in which it has failed to benefit, support or validate the population of a cohesive Timorese exclave whose identity politics have been key to its resilience and to the persistence of its distinct identity. Grenville may have characterised SO-A as a ‘Fifth World entity’; yet, it has primarily existed as a form of (and vessel for) First World conceptual gaming that has imaginatively colonised an existing territory and misrepresented it for rhetorical effect (and some incidental financial gain to Western anarchist activities).

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