

Discourses about adult literacy and about liberation interwoven: recollections of the adult literacy campaign initiated in 1974/5

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Introduction

This paper provides an account of insights emerging from research related to the history of adult literacy in Timor-Leste³. It focuses on the literacy campaign initiated during the brief period of decolonisation from Portuguese rule in 1974/5, and then sustained by the Frente Revolucionária do Timor-Leste Independente (FRETILIN) and by the União Nacional dos Estudantes Timorenses (UNETIM), its student wing, during the years following the Indonesian invasion. Many of those who participated in this literacy campaign lost their lives in the struggle against the Indonesian occupation and there are now very few archival sources relating to adult literacy initiatives during this period, so the research reported in this paper has involved revisiting this period through archival research and oral history work with participants in the campaign who are still with us today. The broad aim has been to deepen our understanding of this significant period in the history of adult and popular education in Timor-Leste. The ideas about the links between adult literacy, emancipation and citizenship that circulated during this period constitute a significant dimension of the context in which adult literacy programmes are being designed and carried out in Timor-Leste today. In the contemporary fields of adult education and youth work, they jostle for space with other ideas about literacy that have been shaped by globalised discourses about literacy and development and about 'literacy skills' for entry into the labour market.

The adult literacy campaign of 1974/5: the context and the key social actors

According to the archival evidence that has been reported so far (e.g. Taylor 1999; Themudo Barata 1998), the population of Timor-Leste was approximately 500,000 in 1974, but only 20% were able to read and write. During the Portuguese colonial period, the education system was severely neglected (Cabral, 2002). However, in the 1950s and 1960s, some efforts were made by the Catholic Church and by the Portuguese state to provide for the education of the East-Timorese population (Smythe 2004; Agência Geral do Ultramar 1966).

With the advent of the Carnation Revolution in Portugal in April 1974, a window of opportunity opened up for the East-Timorese. Political parties were established and, amongst them, was FRETILIN. Each of the parties outlined their political manifesto for the destiny of the territory and FRETILIN emerged as the sole party committed to immediate independence from Portugal (Barbedo Magalhães 1992). Moreover, FRETILIN identified the education of children and adults as one of its main priorities (Cabral 2002; Hill 2002). Among the leadership was a small group who had been university students in Lisbon, based at the *Casa Timor*. While studying there, in the early 1970s, they had encountered students from Portuguese colonies in Africa. Through these contacts, they had learned

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³ The research is based at Tilburg University, the Netherlands and it is part of a wider project funded by NWO-WOTRO Science for Global Development, Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (project no: W01.65.315.00). The title of the wider project is: *Becoming a nation of readers in Timor-Leste: language policy and adult literacy development in a multilingual context*. The principal investigator for the project is Sjaak Kroon. The members of the full interdisciplinary and multilingual research team are: Benjamin de Araújo e Corte Real, Universidade Nacional de Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL), Instituto Nacional de Linguística (INL), Timor-Leste; Sjaak Kroon, Jeanne Kurvers, Estêvão Cabral, and Danielle Boon, Tilburg University, The Netherlands; Marilyn Martin-Jones, University of Birmingham, UK and Aone van Engelenhoven and Edegar da Conceição Sávio, Leiden University, the Netherlands.

about the work of Paulo Freire among the rural poor in the north east of Brazil in the 1960s and about his ideas regarding the role of adult literacy in consciousness-raising (*consciencialização*) (e.g. Freire 1967). These were ideas that had been taken up in Guiné-Bissau and Mozambique in adult literacy classes, in the liberated zones during the long colonial wars against the Portuguese (cf. Freire 1977). When these Timorese students returned to Timor-Leste in September 1974, some of them, notably Mau Lear⁴ (António Carvarinho) and Sahe (Vicente Reis), initiated an adult literacy campaign based on the same principles. The Timorese *Campanha de Alfabetização* thus became an integral part of the political programme of FRETILIN throughout the campaign for independence. We cannot separate the one from the other. The two campaigns were closely interconnected (Cabral and Martin-Jones 2008).

Because the vast majority of the adult population had had no education in Portuguese, Tetun was chosen as the language for the campaign since it was the *lingua franca* across most of the territory. An adult literacy handbook in Tetun was devised by Mau Lear and his wife Bi-Lear (Maria do Céu Gonçalves Pereira), who was a primary school teacher. The handbook was based on what Mau-Lear had learned, in Lisbon, about the Freirean approach to adult literacy and it was printed in Dili⁵. It was used by adult literacy volunteers, known as *brigadistas*, who were involved in the campaign in different regions⁶. Two regional literacy centres were established: Centro Piloto 1 in Aileu and Centro Piloto 2 in Bucoli, near Baucau. Centro Piloto 2 was founded by Sahe.

Revisiting the literacy campaign through oral history and photographs

As indicated above, the main methods of data collection for this project were archival research and oral history interviews with former participants in the literacy campaign. The research was carried out by Estêvão Cabral in Timor-Leste and Portugal in 2009 and 2010. 22 oral history interviews were conducted with 16 women and 6 men. 16 of the interviewees (women and men) chose to be interviewed in Tetun and 6 chose Portuguese. All these interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in full, in the original language.

As the oral history research progressed, it became clear that the 22 interviewees fell into four broad groups, as follows: (1.) 9 of them (6 women and 3 men) indicated that they had been trained in 1974/5, as volunteers for the literacy campaign, by the university students who had returned from Portugal and by other members of the FRETILIN leadership. (2.) 5 interviewees (3 women and 2 men) indicated that they had received their training up in the mountains of Timor-Leste after the Indonesian invasion of December 1975 and had then served as literacy volunteers. (3.) A further 5 interviewees (4 women and 1 man) had been active participants in the campaign but had not been through any training. (4.) 3 other interviewees had been primary school teachers at the time and had volunteered for the literacy campaign, of their own initiative, during the Easter vacation of 1975. Because of their diverse pathways into the campaign, the opportunities available to them for training as literacy volunteers and the varied nature of their involvement, the interviewees spoke in different ways about the campaign and revealed different understandings of its purpose. They also expressed different ideas about literacy pedagogy.

In the next five sections of this paper, we have chosen to focus on the group of 9 interviewees who were originally trained by the university students from Portugal and who were involved in the literacy campaign from the outset. There are clear themes that resonate across these interviews and they relate to different aspects of the campaign. Also, because of space constraints, we draw on just four of these interviews in illustrating the themes. The different aspects of the campaign are as follows: (1.) the campaign leadership and the training of these volunteers; (2.) the groups of political activists involved; (3.) the interviewees' accounts of the purposes of the campaign; (4.) their ideas about literacy pedagogy and about the Freirean approach to adult literacy; (5.) the conditions for the conduct of the campaign before and after the Indonesian invasion. In this final section, we draw on the interview data and on photographs from the archives.

⁴ Mau Lear is a *nom de guerre*, as is Sahe. The given names of these two university students returning from Portugal are shown in parentheses.

⁵ Personal communication with Roque Rodrigues

⁶ Estêvão Cabral briefly participated in the campaign himself in 1975, though he was never trained as a literacy volunteer.

The campaign leadership and the training of volunteers

The prominent role of Mau Lear and Sahe in the leadership of the campaign and the training of volunteers was particularly evident in the interviews with the ‘group of nine’. They were referred to by name or by their *nom de guerre*. Sometimes, they were mentioned along with other university students returning from Portugal in 1974, such as Hatta (Hamis Bassarewan), as we see in Extracts 1 and 2 below. Sometimes, other members of the 1974/5 FRETILIN leadership, such as Roque Rodrigues, were also mentioned as contributors to the political education and training of literacy volunteers.

Extract 1: Interview with MM, in Tetun, 19/10/09

EC: *Do you remember the names of any other people who were involved – either as teachers or as teacher trainers?*

MM: *Ah! From the beginning comrades Sahe, Mau-Lear and Hatta were there. It was the three of them who trained us.*

Extract 2: Interview with ZS, in Tetun, 22/10/09

EC: *What were you doing before that?*

ZS: *..... We got our training while we were in UNETIM, it was Sr. Roque Rodrigues, Roque Rodrigues who first trained us, after that students who returned from Lisbon and together they trained us on politics, and Paulo Freire’s literacy method. So we followed this method in 1975, in the month of April, May.*

The groups of political activists involved

Members of UNETIM

All the interviewees in the first cohort of trained volunteers had, at some point, been members of UNETIM, the student wing of FRETILIN. In 1974/5, the UNETIM membership consisted of secondary school students since no university had been established in Timor-Leste by the Portuguese. These interviewees spoke of UNETIM as their way into the literacy campaign and into involvement with the wider political movement for Independence. This comes over clearly in the next interview extract:

Extract 3: Interview with AB, in Portuguese, 15/10/09

EC: *Did you teach alone or with others? With whom? Were they members of FRETILIN or UNETIM?*

AB: *Yes, I went to teach. We were a group...we were all members of UNETIM and we weren’t... when we began, we were not yet members or militants of FRETILIN! We were students, we got together in the organization that was founded, because, as we know, there were few people with basic schooling... education!*

Organização Popular das Mulheres de Timor (OPMT)

The participation of women in the campaign was particularly significant. Women literacy volunteers outnumbered men in late 1974 and early 1975⁷. OPMT (the women’s branch of FRETILIN) was founded on August 28, 1975 and several of the women interviewed in this project had started out as members of UNETIM and then moved across to OPMT, while continuing their involvement in the literacy campaign and building on the work initiated by UNETIM. We see this in Extract 4 below, taken from an interview with one of the women who had been involved from the start of the campaign:

Extract 4: Interview with AB in Portuguese, 15/10/09

EC: *Is there anything else that you remember about the experience of teaching adult literacy?*

AB: *August, August 28 ...to be exact, er... a number of students who were in UNETIM, women, female students, integrated into the Popular Organisation of Timorese Women... OPMT continued, more or less, with the activities that UNETIM initiated.*

⁷ Personal observation by Estêvão Cabral, during his involvement in the campaign. This observation resonates with the interview data gathered for this project.

Organização Popular da Juventude de Timor (OPJT)

OPJT, the youth branch of FRETILIN, was also mentioned by one of the interviewees who had been trained in the first cohort of volunteers. The membership of OPJT was broader than that of UNETIM: it included those who had not had access to secondary schooling under Portuguese colonial rule. Some UNETIM members, like the interviewee cited in Extract 5, were members of both organisations. It is, of course, important to note here that UNETIM ceased to exist after the Indonesian invasion, with the demise of the Portuguese education system.

Extract 5: Interview with PC, in Portuguese, 20/10/09

EC: *Did you teach alone or with others? With whom? Were they members of FRETILIN or UNETIM?*

PC: *Yes, we were part of the OPJT [Popular Organisation of East Timorese Youth] and from UNETIM – the UNETIM block, yes!*

Understandings of purpose of the campaign

All 9 interviewees who had been in the first cohort of volunteers recounted that the adult literacy campaign was closely bound up with two broad political purposes: that of raising people's awareness of the oppressive conditions of Portuguese colonialism (*consciencialização*); and that of the struggle for self-determination. Thus, for example, in several of the interviews, we see explicit links being made in the discourse of the interviewees, between the literacy campaign and *consciencialização*. Take, for example, the following interview extracts:

Extract 6: Interview with AB, in Portuguese, 15/10/09

EC: *[Asking about the adult learners] How, and to what extent, did they use what they had learned?*

AB: *Yes! I think we achieved our goals to some extent, because it was not only reading and writing but also awareness-raising.*

Extract 7: Interview with PC, in Portuguese, 20/10/09

EC: *What did the participants learn?*

PC: *Besides reading and writing... also our objective was to politicise and to engage in awareness-raising campaigns, to instil the spirit in them [the adult learners] ... for independence...yes? Because, at that time, our objective was to politicise our people and at the same time, we wanted to ...wanted to support our people so that they could read and write, yes?*

Ideas about literacy pedagogy

All 9 of these interviewees showed that they were aware of some of the principles underpinning the Freirean approach to adult literacy. For example, they indicated that their pedagogy was based around 'key words'. They defined these as terms that were associated with everyday life in Timor-Leste at the time: words such as *fós* (rice) and *tabaco* (tobacco) as shown in the interview extract below.

Extract 8: Interview with MM, in Tetun (19/10/09)

EC: *How did you teach [literacy]?*

MM: *In the beginning we told them the word 'tobacco'. After that we asked them: do you know tobacco? They would tell us that they knew tobacco because they smoked it. In turn, we asked them to explain to us the process of planting tobacco. As we learned with them about agriculture, how to follow the process from planting to harvest and selling it [the tobacco] in the market, they learned with us letters... letters. We asked them to explain the process of planting and they would explain to us by saying this is the way we plant tobacco, using the seeds, when it is ready we harvest, lay it in the sun, cut it in small pieces, depending on how we want it. If we want have it smell nice we add honey, or coffee, they explained to us. In turn we told them that they shouldn't smoke too much because it would damage their health. At the same time, they had sell it to get money to buy soap, 'omo', these kinds of things. After they had explained to us and we had explained to them, we raised their awareness and then we showed them the way to write the word 'tobacco'.*

Another interviewee remembered some of the actions that were taken to change the relationship between literacy teacher and literacy learner (*Interview with ZS, in Tetun, 22/10/09*). Speaking of her

work as a young literacy volunteer in Centro Piloto 1 in Aileu, she talked about shared work in the paddy fields and in the vegetable gardens in the mornings followed by afternoon and evening meetings at the Centre and literacy classes that focused on the shared work of the morning. In this interview, there is a clear resonance with Freire's writing about embedding adult literacy pedagogy in the lived realities of the learners and about democratisation of the relationship between teacher and student to create space for dialogue.

The campaign in 1974/5: the people, the places and the resources

The first training sessions took place in Dili, in late 1974. Our interviewees recalled several places where the sessions were held: Liceu Francisco Machado, the gymnasium of the Escola Técnica and the teacher training school of Canto Resende. The first adult literacy classes began in early 1975. Two interviewees mentioned that these classes were based in the Kintal Bot district of Dili. This was a district where there was strong support for FRETILIN, particularly from migrants from Uatolari and Viqueque. Both men and women in the area were workers in the coffee trade.

There and elsewhere in Dili, the literacy classes were mostly held in private houses and involved 4 to 5 households at a time. The numbers participating in the classes varied from 12 to 20, as we see from the following interview extract:

Extract 9: Interview with MM, in Tetun (19/10/09)

EC: *Did you teach alone or with others? If with others... with whom? Were they members of FRETILIN or UNETIM?*

MM: *Yes! We were all members of UNETIM. We had a procedure which involved going to teach four or five households [at a time]. Once people had gathered in one house we started to teach.*

EC: *How many were there in your classes?*

MM: *Women and men...I don't remember because sometimes there were up to 12 people and we were told that there should not be more than 20. There were up to 12 people and 15 was the maximum.*

Those who had been trained had access to the literacy manual: *Rai Timor, rai ita niang*. They also worked from the notes (*apontamentos*) that they had kept from their training sessions, as noted in the extract below:

Extract 10: Interview with AB, in Portuguese, 15/10/09

EC: *Did you use a book? Did the students use a book? If so, which one?*

AB: *Eh... we had notes...in our preparations we used notes as a way of guiding us to teach.*

Some of the interviewees indicated that they had contributed to the drive to extend the literacy campaign into other regions of Timor-Leste, in April 1975, during the Easter vacation. Groups of UNETIM secondary school students travelled out to the regions during the Easter vacation, when the schools were closed and based their literacy classes in local school buildings. As we see from the extract below, several of the women in the first cohort of volunteers went, with OPMT, to Aileu, to Centro Piloto 1.

Extract 11: Interview with MM, in Tetun (19/10/09)

EC: *How long did you teach? (for how many weeks, months or years?)*

MM: *We started to teach in April. At the same time we joined OPMT and a group of us went to Aileu to form the Centro Piloto. [The person] who stayed in Dili was comrade Aicha and her group to continue with the literacy campaign [there]. When we went up to the countryside [lit. forest] we also continued with the literacy campaign in some areas. For example, those of us in the Sector Centro Leste and others in the Sector Centro Norte continued with the literacy campaign. And not only that, before the coup, in Bucoli, we had a pilot centre in Bucoli. Pilot centre number 2 there was also part of the literacy campaign.*

However, by late September/early October 1975, with the threat of an Indonesian invasion looming, many literacy students from Kintal Bot volunteered to go to the military front on the border with West Timor (*Interview with AB, 15/10/09*). This brought the literacy campaign in Dili to an end.

Conditions after the Indonesian invasion

All 9 of the interviewees who were part of the first, pioneering cohort of literacy volunteers confirmed that, after the Indonesian invasion of December 1975, the literacy campaign continued up in the mountains, behind the lines held by FALINTIL, the armed wing of FRETILIN⁸. A new cohort of literacy volunteers was also trained during this period. The adult literacy work continued in the Centro Piloto in Aileu for at least two years because of its remote, mountainous location (*Interview with ZS, 22/10/09*), but the literacy teaching in Bucoli ceased soon after the invasion because of its proximity to Baucau.

The conditions for this new phase of adult literacy work were, however, much harsher: few writing materials were available up in the mountains, though supplies came through from time to time from the clandestine front in the urban areas. Finally, when the main focus of the Resistance shifted to the clandestine front in the 1980s, conditions there became too dangerous to organise literacy classes. The efforts of those in the clandestine front were therefore directed towards sending supplies to the smaller armed front up in the mountains. (Cabral and Martin-Jones 2008).

Concluding comments

In this paper, we have provided some brief glimpses into the lived experiences of some of the participants in the campaign initiated in Timor-Leste 1974 and into their accounts of the nature and purpose of the adult literacy work that they were engaged in. The focus of the paper was on interviews with a group of 9 women and men who were involved in the campaign from the outset and who were all trained by the group of university students returning from Portugal in 1974. Among all 22 of those interviewed for this research project, the 'group of nine' were those who were most centrally involved in the political campaign for Independence and in the literacy campaign associated with it. As we have seen, their accounts of the campaign were closely intertwined with political discourses about liberation from colonialism and about self-determination. They also foregrounded several Freirean ideas about adult literacy that were circulating widely in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in the context of the social and political movements of those times. Freire's political exile from Brazil from 1964 onwards and his engagement with the anti-colonial struggles in Guiné-Bissau and Mozambique (e.g. Freire 1977) contributed to the spread of these ideas and to their take-up in Timor-Leste from the mid-1970s (Durnan 2005; Boughton 2008).

However, as we noted at the beginning of the paper, there was considerable diversity across the sample of 22 interviewees. Others had taken different pathways into the campaign and had had different opportunities for training as volunteers. They had therefore had different degrees of access to the ideas behind the literacy campaign. So, as the research progressed, we became increasingly aware of the need for a critical, multi-layered approach to the study of literacy campaigns. Clearly, every campaign needs to be studied with reference to the particular political and economic context in which it arises and with reference to the specific conditions in which the campaign is conducted. It is only in this way that we can understand the particular ways in which a campaign unfolds (Arnove and Graff 1987). At the same time, we also need to focus our research lenses on the different social actors involved, how they are positioned at different stages within a campaign, how and to what extent they take up ideas about literacy and how these ideas guide their pedagogy. Particular advantages accrue from oral history work and, where possible, ethnography because of the focus on human agency and on people's own understandings of the particular events in which they are participating.

⁸ FALINTIL remained the armed wing of FRETILIN until 1986, when it became the armed front for National Liberation

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