

Helen Hill's contribution to the understanding of early East Timorese nationalism 1974-1975

Michael Leach

In early 1975 a young Masters student from Australia landed in Dili, intending to study the decolonisation process in Portuguese Timor. Instead, she quickly settled on a study of FRETILIN, a new political party, already emerging as a dominant political force in Portuguese Timor as it belatedly decolonised, and as a key vehicle for early East Timorese nationalism. Though her study enjoyed some circulation as a Master thesis¹ from 1978, it was finally published in 2002 as *Stirrings of nationalism in East Timor: Fretilin 1974-1978: the origins, ideologies and strategies of a nationalist movement*. Though only published a decade ago, her text is now quite difficult to locate outside libraries, a fact which some enterprising publisher should reflect upon. It is also worth noting that this work was available in Indonesian some time before it was accessible in its native English: such was the thirst for the relevant information on the early independence struggle among young East Timorese clandestine activists in the late 1990s. As a published work, it first appeared in Indonesian, translated in 1998/9 by RENETIL activists Aderito J. Soares and Nuno Rodrigues along with their Indonesian colleague Nug Katjasungkana, and printed in Dili in 2000 as *Gerakan Pembebasan Nasional Timor-Leste*.²

This paper offers a critical appreciation of Helen Hill's pioneering contribution to the understanding of early East Timorese nationalism from 1974-5. It first overviews Hill's 'seven themes' of FRETILIN nationalism, arguing that were prescient analyses, have stood the test of time. Drawing on interviews, it also suggests one further theme of early East Timorese nationalist discourse.

Background

In the wake of Portugal's Carnation Revolution on 25 April 1974, four new political parties emerged to take different stances on future of then Portuguese Timor. In doing so, they each articulated distinct ideas of an East Timorese political community beyond the Portuguese colonial era. The first to emerge, the *Timorese Democratic Union* (UDT), initially advocated a longer transition to independence in federation with Portugal: a vision of political community which found some support in General António de Spínola's proposal (during his brief tenure of Portuguese President from May to September 1974) for a Lusophone Federation between Portugal and its smaller colonies. The second party to emerge, with its nucleus in a group of disaffected nationalists in Dili's small educated elite was the *Timorese Social Democratic Association* (ASDT), advocating a rapid transition to independence, and outline a vision of an independent post-colonial nation, and a moderate social democratic program of popular literacy, land reform and raising an anti-colonial nationalist consciousness. Influenced by African anti-colonial movements, the ASDT renamed itself the *Revolutionary Front for an Independent Timor-Leste* (FRETILIN) by September 1974. With little popular support, but led by a small number of Liruai and with powerful backers in Indonesia, *Association for the Integration of Timor into Indonesia* (later the *Timorese Popular Democratic Association* APODETI) agitated for integration with Indonesia. With a new President in Portugal by September 1974, Portugal's intention to divest itself of all colonies became clearer: a development which brought FRETILIN's and APODETI's respective positions more in line with the geopolitical realities of the situation, and soon drew the UDT to also support a more rapid tradition to independence, and into a short-lived coalition with FRETILIN by early 1975. Frequently neglected by

¹ Helen Mary Hill. 1978. *Fretilin: the origins, ideologies and strategies of a nationalist movement in East Timor*. MA Thesis, Monash University.

² Helen Hill. 2000. *Gerakan Pembebasan Nasional Timor-Leste*. Dili: Yayasan Hak and Sahe Institute for Liberation. Translators: Aderito J. Soares, Nuno Rodrigues and Nug Katjasungkana

historians (cf. Nicol 1978 Hicks forthcoming), a fourth party *The Popular Monarchic Association of Timor* (later *The Association of Timorese Heroes* - KOTA) outlined a different vision of East Timorese political community in which the traditional leadership would take a key role in the future state. Proposing a national parliament of local *Liruai* indirectly electing a 'popular' Monarch, KOTA sought to replicate some traditional elements of *Lisan* at a national level, albeit with a curious set of hybridised modern/ customary institutions.

Themes of early East Timorese nationalism

The liberation struggle is above all, a struggle both for the preservation and survival of the cultural values of the people and for the harmonization and development of these values within a national framework (Cabral 1970 cited in Hill 2002, 72).

Strongly influenced by African nationalists, such as Guinea-Bissau's Amilcar Cabral, early FRETILIN leaders took the position that anti-colonial nationalism should do two things: it should draw upon popular and traditional values or symbols, but reframe these as the characteristics of unified modern nation or 'people'.³ They therefore attempted to define an East Timorese national identity in ways which rejected Portugal's late colonial vision that the Timorese were members of a 'pluri-racial' Portuguese community (Ulramar 1970)⁴, and which also transcended the local identities of distinct Timorese ethno-linguistic groups.

These 'dual features' can be found in much of early modern Timorese nationalism from 1974-5, and in this regard, Helen Hill's pioneering 1978 study remains the central source for its identification of seven 'themes of FRETILIN's nationalism (2002, pp.70-92). As Hill argues Fretilin rapidly had the task of developing a conventional 'third-wave' nationalism that expressed both *the right to self-determination* (89-90) and *opposition to Portuguese rule* (70-72), rejecting, for example, the UDTs early ideas of federation with Portugal. By the same token, Hill also identified nationalism as *the reassertion of Timorese culture* as another key theme. This mix was evident in the literacy campaigns in vernacular Tetun, using the literacy manual "*Rai Timor Rai Ita Niang*" [*Timor is our country*] (1975) which focussed on ordinary villagers' lives, and used the lessons as a vehicle for explaining the exploitative nature of colonial social relations, and the case for independence. This was also evident in use of traditional songs with new nationalist lyrics in FRETILIN campaigns, and the use of local languages in campaigning, which quickly saw FRETILIN support rise in the districts, reaching out beyond the small elite contesting power in Dili. The elevation of the nationalist generic 'Maubere' was the prime example of the 'dual character' of East Timorese nationalism, as it "gave new high status to traditional forms of social organization and in particular to democratic aspects of the traditional Timorese society, as ASDT founders saw them" (74). Early nationalist also valorised new heroes, moving beyond the colonial pantheon of 'Heroes of the Portuguese empire'. Thus Hill notes Fretilin early associations with both 1912 Boaventura uprising and, to a lesser extent, the 1959 Viqueque uprising in their campaigns, and early Timorese nationalist historiography such as Abiio Araujo interpreting the long history of the local uprisings from 1642 -1912 as wars of independence (Araujo 1977, Gunn 1999). Nonetheless, the use of traditional symbols was selective, and - as is discussed further below - relations between the Dili-based educated FRETILIN cadre and with traditional authorities were frequently tense and plagued by vastly different reference points.

At the same time, given the rapid movement of geopolitical realities, FRETILIN rapidly had to *define East Timor as different from Indonesian Timor* to mobilise nascent nationalist sentiment against APODETI's ideas, and more importantly, against the growing threat of forced integration. FRETILIN nationalists therefore also framing the nation as one irrevocably divorced from west Timor by 400 years of

³ These processes has been variously depicted by scholars of nationalism as 'imagining a nation' (Anderson 1983) or by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) as 'inventing' a national "tradition".

⁴ This was expressed in the official *Timor: Pequena Monografia* as: "Portugal constitutes a pluri-racial community based on the equality of all citizens according to law and with respect to the cultural values of all the ethnic groups which comprise it". Agencia Geral do Ultramar, Lisbon, 1970.

colonial history and experience, making distinction with Indonesian Timor an additional focus, and branding APODETI as 'neo-colonialist' force (Joint Communiqué 2). This in effect required a difficult shift in focus from a conventional anti-colonialist narrative to a more complex narrative of the differential impact of Portuguese colonialism on the eastern half of Timor, and its creation of a distinct political community over 450 years. It is this turn of events that gave East Timorese nationalism one element of its distinctive character.

The distinction with Dutch-colonised and Indonesian west Timor drove considerable reflection on the role of Portuguese colonialism in forging a separate national identity, and one notable feature of early Timorese nationalist historiography. *There is little question this was driven by the rising threat of Indonesian as decolonization process commenced.* As Hill notes, both ASDT and UDT were 'incensed' when in El Tari, the governor of west Timor, argued in September 1974 for the 'reunification' of Timor under Indonesian sovereignty, rejecting this primordialist position by noting that Indonesia was a 'recent phenomenon' comparison to the 450 year Portuguese presence, a different colonial power which had created "irreversible" difference between the two communities (Hill 79) by.

At this point it is useful to note a document in Portuguese from the period, unknown to 1970s researchers, which is a *relatorio* drafted by Alarico Fernandes and Ramos-Horta (1975) written after their visit to Jakarta in early 1975. Marked "private", the document details an internal debate over whether an independent Timor-Leste should associate itself with Southeast Asia or the South Pacific. Making a case for the advantages of "Grupo Pacifico Sul", the authors note a "better ethnic and cultural approximation" with the South Pacific cultures, more progressive regimes, richer countries (in Australian and New Zealand) and most importantly, the fact that the association would "deliver a valid argument against the thesis that Timor-Leste ought to integrate with Indonesia for reasons of geographical continuity, ethnic origin and cultural commonalities" (author's translation 1975, 2).

In addition, Hill identified the theme of *nationalism as national unity* – finding the commonalities that transcended ethno-linguistic groups, as a key concern of early nationalists. As Hill notes, outside the educated elites, and particularly in the rural interior, few saw themselves as East Timorese, and were more accustomed to view others ethno-linguistic groups as foreigners (2002, 77). FRETILIN also saw the division between language groups, reinforced by colonial practices of divide and rule and the transit pass laws, as a critical barrier to developing nationalist sentiment, and as noted above, become a political major theme of literacy program. Thus, for example, the manual focussed on identifying the Portuguese as a common source of oppression. Notably, the manual also included a map of Timor-Leste, allowing illiterate subsistence farmer, perhaps for the first time, to visualise the national territory and, with district capitals marked, their own place in it (Casa Dos Timores 1975, 10), providing a new national frame of reference to the literacy exercise.

Hills' final and related themes of *nationalism as economic advancement of Timorese peasants*, and *freedom from colonial or neo-colonial economic control* were positions evident in Fretilin's early manifestos. These included positions on diversified agriculture over exports to improve diets, and were matched by at least some grass roots activities during their effective interregnum in power from August to December 1975, including most notably Nicolau Lobato's pilot cooperative projects in Bazartete. Cooperative proposals also focused on key popular grievances regarding the low prices at which agricultural surpluses were bought by Chinese merchants (88). Though these programs were never widely deployed, they were popular in the areas they were developed. While wider proposal of 'economic reconstruction' remained on paper, along with the literacy program and the development of health clinics, these were successful in attracting many supporters to the party. This is perhaps an early example of state building linking closely with nation-building – as services provided centrally by state help foster belief in the nation as a locus of political community.

Each of Hill's themes were evident in policy positions in the FRETILIN program of 1975. While recognising Portugal as the only legitimate partner for decolonization (Joliffe 74 REF FRET) it demanded the immediate recognition by Portuguese of 'de jure' independence, the 'gradual elimination of colonial relations and structures', including the forced labour and colonial administrative structures, and the creation of co-operatives, 'which will be the basis of the economic and social life of East Timor' (FRETILIN 1975,

20). It also demanded the ‘elimination of the colonialist education system and the fostering of Timorese culture’ and the ‘fostering of literature and art of various ethnic groups through cultural exchanges’ (21). While allowing for the maintenance of ‘traditional institutions of justice’ (22), it was perhaps above all a clear call for the establishment of modern forms of political participation through ‘organizations for workers, women, students and youths to facilitate political participation’.

It is argued below that beyond these seven themes of early East Timorese nationalism identified by Hill, one addition could be made. Alongside Hill’s original list was also the idea of *Kore a’an*, or self-liberation, which focussed on the limitations on personal autonomy imposed by traditional and Church restrictions.

Self-liberation: *Kore a’an*

As an early member of the *Popular Organisation of Timorese Women* (Organizacao Popular de Mulher Timor - OPMT) Aurora Ximenes was involved in early FRETILIN campaigns in 1975, and throughout 1975-1978 in the *zonas libertadas*. According to Ximenes, one of the most important positions of early nationalists was to question those aspects of tradition, colonial social relations, and of Church doctrine which limited the rights of individuals, and particularly women. She identified the concept of *kore a’an*, or ‘freeing one’s self’, as a key theme in FRETILIN social thought in 1975 (Interview with author, 2010):

This was the language that FRETILIN used... women must liberate themselves from culture... liberate themselves from the customs and traditions that tie them down. Women must free themselves. In order to do this women have to participate in politics, they must be socialised and raise political awareness amongst the people, so that everyone awakens to the need to improve oneself...to change and move forward, and for this we need independence. Because for almost 500 years, Portugal ruled over us and the situation of women remained the same. This is what they said to women, activist women like the students in UNETIM [Association of East Timorese students] ... Fretilin started because of these students. Female students and male students began talking about these things.

Ximenes explains that *kore a’an* encompassed a range of challenges to prevailing norms, from opposing the narrow gender roles for women reinforced by Timor’s patriarchal society to other practices such as the harassment of single women, and polygamy⁵:

We began to organise women's groups in order to tell them: “Now you must liberate yourselves from the customs that bind you and prevent you from going out on your own. Now you too can speak, this is your right. You too can leave the house, your safety is assured”... because in the past when women went out on their own people would harass them. So FRETILIN issued an order: “Nobody should harass women. Even if a single woman walks together in a group with five men you must ensure that this woman is not harassed. Whoever harasses this woman will have to come and do a self-criticism. He must come and in front of the people admit: ‘Today I harassed a woman’. Women you must be brave and speak up when you have been harassed, insulted or sworn at and say: ‘You cannot not speak to me like that’”.

In OPMT’s view, though the limitations on women’s autonomy had been reinforced by colonialism, change would also require a critique of traditional society. In this respect, the idea of *kore a’an* was instrumental to a modernising nationalism, representing a fundamental view of citizen equality and women’s active participation which together constituted an important challenge to aspects of custom. As Ximenes commented:

⁵ Regarding polygamy, Ximenes stated: “Another way men suppressed women was through polygamy. Polygamy was when a man marries two, three wives. This means that the first wife is not free. So [Fretilin] policy was to declare... ‘Men cannot have more than one wife. If not, the first wife will be unhappy. There will be fights in the home and the rights of one or the other will be oppressed.’ So, that’s why we called this ‘*kore a’an*’, personal liberation” (Interview with author, 2010).

There are some places in Timor and some cultures where women are free like in Bobonaro and some parts of Manatuto where their parents also give them rights. They don't just give rights to their sons but also to their daughters. But in most of Timor and to this day discrimination exists. To give women freedom, women must also participate and think "I too must come to the realisation that what we teach in the home is wrong. I don't have education, I am not economically independent" ... So, women must free themselves, but they have to participate in their own liberation and recognise that "Yes, I too have the right to do this or do that". That is what I mean by 'kore a'an', to liberate oneself.

As noted above, the FRETILIN literacy booklet provided the tools for traditional communities to envisage a wider "imagined" community of Timor-Leste, and emphasised the common position of Timorese in relation to both Portuguese colonial authorities, and Chinese traders. An early FRETILIN song, recited to the author by Aurora Ximenes in 2010, highlighted these themes, which were also critical of traditional authorities.

Malae ho China naok tein,
The Malae [Portuguese] and Chinese are thieves
Liurai sira mos beik,
the Liurai are ignorant.
Ema riku ho matenek sira ne'e bosok ita
The rich and educated are making fools of you

As the song indicates, dealing with tradition rural Timorese often proved a difficult area for young *assimilado* nationalists from Dili. Hoping to convert Liurais to their side, and with some success, FRETILIN tread reasonably carefully around traditional authorities, depicting them – at worst - as dupes of colonial authorities rather than as complicit. Aurora Ximenes recalls her experience as a young OPMT activist:

Back then many Liurai were also uneducated ... they didn't understand that others were exploiting Timor. When we went to the mountains and rural areas we would sing our songs ...and sometimes the Liurai would also listen to the words and think: "Yes, it is true, in the past we remained silent in the face of the oppression of our people". But we didn't confront the Liurais directly saying: "You, Liurai, are like this or like that". Their participation in the struggle for independence was also important. ...The Liurai were like the servants of the Portuguese among the people but they were too afraid to speak out.... So people sang these songs because that is what they wanted to express, rather than bad-mouthing them The Liurai also participated in the struggle for national liberation.

At times it was also clear that they had gone too far. While the literacy campaign was a success for recruitment, as Hill (2002, 108) comments "[h]ostility was aroused in some areas when Fretilin leaders made attacks on the 'sacred' Portuguese flag". Instructively, Fretilin leaders would later realize that a better strategy was to suggest a new *lulik* in the Fretilin flag, rather than to ridicule these attachments as "religious superstition" (2002, 71).

Conclusion

While Helen Hill's important study sits alongside other important primary accounts of the critical 1974-5 period (e.g Jolliffe, Nicol) it remains the work that focussed most closely on a thematic analysis of early East Timorese nationalism. Tellingly, the desire to understand and circulate this type of analysis was substantial in clandestine RENETIL circles in the 1990s, and Hill's work was translated in 2000, appearing first in Indonesian. It has been argued here that one additional theme was that of *kore a'an*, or self-liberation, evident in the way early FRETILIN nationalists and OPMT feminists sought to challenge traditional and Church norms. Helen Hill's contemporary analysis in 1975 remains a far-sighted one which

subsequent study, even given the enormous benefit of hindsight, has tended to validate, even if subsequent splits in the independence movement were yet to become evident.

Bibliography

- Anderson, Benedict 1983, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London.
- Casa Dos Timores 1975, *Rai Timor: Rai Ita Niang*, Casa Dos Timores, Lisbon (Photocopied reproduction of original, Jill Jolliffe Collection, Canberra: National Library of Australia.
- de Araujo, Abilio 1977, *Timor Leste: Os Loricos Voltaram a Cantar: Das Guerras Independentistas a Revolucao do Povo Maubere*, Lisbon, 1977.
- Fernandes, Alarcio and Jose Ramos-Horta 1975, "Relatório da Alarico Fernandes e de Ramos-Horta acerca da visita a Jakarta", 1 May, AMRT Archives 05000.284
- FRETILIN 1975, *Programme of the Revolutionary Front of East Timor*, Dili.
- Gunn, Geoffrey C. 1999. *Timor Loro Sae: 500 Years*, Livros do Oriente, Macau., Hill, Helen 1978, *Fretilin: the origins, ideologies and strategies of a nationalist movement in East Timor*, Unpublished MA Thesis, Monash University
- 2000, *Gerakan Pembebasan Nasional Timor-Leste*, Yayasan Hak and Sahe Institute for Liberation, Dili.
Translators: Aderito J. Soares, Nuno Rodrigues and Nug Katjasungkana
- 2002, *Stirrings of nationalism in East Timor: FRETILIN 1974-1978: The origins, ideologies and strategies of a nationalist movement*, Otford Press, Otford NSW.
- Hobsbawm, Eric and Terence Ranger (eds) 1983, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Jolliffe, Jill 1978, *East Timor: nationalism & colonialism*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, Qld.
- Nicol, Bill. 1978, *Timor: The Stillborn Nation*, Widescope, Melbourne.
- Ramos-Horta, Jose 1975, 'Comunicado de Ramos-Horta dando conta da constituição da coligação entre a FRETILIN e a UDT' [Joint Communique of Fretilin and UDT], 21 January, AMRT Archives 05000.278.
- Ximenes, Aurora 2010, Interview with Author, Dili, 24 March.