

## Writing History in post-conflict Timor-Leste

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In 2005, 25 years after independence, the Pacific island nation of Vanuatu produced its first comprehensive high-school history curriculum (Lightner & Naupa 2005). According to its authors, resources and capacity were not the only factors in the delay. Writing a national history curriculum after colonialism proved to be an inherently difficult negotiation in a community divided between Anglophone and Francophone communities, with an intricate and complex legacy of resistance and accommodation so close in the past (Lightner & Naupa 2004). For East Timor, emerging from two consecutive colonial eras, these challenges are profound (Leach 2006, 2007). This paper looks briefly at the practical and symbolic challenges facing history curriculum developers, some historiographical debates over writing post-conflict history, and concludes with some recommendations.

### Practical Challenges for history curriculum developers

The practical challenges facing history curriculum developers primarily concern financial resources, a strategic priority on primary education, a multilingual environment, and to a lesser degree, access to historical sources. For history teachers in Timor-Leste key problems include a lack of curriculum resources beyond primary level, suitable textbooks, resources, and lesson plans; the need for more teacher training; and disjunctions between home and school language environments (Leach 2006, 2007).

#### *Developing a history curriculum*

During the 'emergency' phase under UNTAET, Indonesian textbooks were purchased and controversial sections on history and national identity were removed (Nicolai 2004). With the history components of interim Indonesian texts unable to be used in the emergency curricula, history teaching since independence has largely been reliant on teacher initiative.

The 2006 introduction of a curriculum outline package at primary level for the subject *Estudo do Meio* (Environment Studies), which includes East Timor studies (covering historical themes in the module 'Me and the Country' from Years Three to Six), provided much-needed structure for the curriculum at primary level, though teacher manuals, student texts, student assessment materials and other resources are still needed. An emergency curriculum for pre-secondary was completed by a team of Brazilian curriculum developers in 2005, though focus groups at that time suggested this had not been widely distributed. Perhaps reflecting some of the wider challenges facing curriculum developers discussed below, the pre-secondary 'emergency curriculum' did not address issues in East Timorese history beyond the carnation revolution in Portugal in 1974.

The secondary history curriculum was yet to be commenced as of late 2009, though the Ministry of Education in early 2009 established the Research and Development Unit to work on the development of History and Geography curriculum for pre-secondary and secondary, as part of the Cycle III of Basic Education (Pre-Secondary) and General Secondary Education scheduled across 2009-10. A revision of the primary curriculum was also funded by UNICEF 2009-2010. Portuguese professors in history from the Universities of Minho and Aveiro have been engaged to develop post-primary history curricula. At a tertiary level, some history is incorporated into certain courses run by UNTL, including courses on politics, and nationalism. Various seminars on occupation history were also run by an external researcher at UNTL in 2009.

#### *Survey of history teachers*

In 2005 the author conducted a survey and focus group of East Timorese history teachers<sup>2</sup> to assess how they were meeting the challenges of teaching in the absence of formal curricular resources: including

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detailed syllabuses, teacher manuals, texts and adequate school library resources. Since that survey, a primary curriculum outline has been introduced, but there has been little change at pre-secondary and secondary levels.

As such, most of the 2005 survey findings remain current for pre-secondary and secondary teachers. At that time, 78% of respondents reported that they had received no formal training or official guidance on history teaching since independence. Overall, 43% reported no access to formal written curricular material at all; 25% used the ‘emergency’ curriculum outlines in conjunction with their own work; and a further 29% relied on material prepared within their schools, in conjunction with their own work. In the absence of formal pre-secondary or secondary curriculum and textbooks, the reference materials used by teachers varied greatly across the respondent group<sup>3</sup>.

A number of teachers noted that they were teaching East Timorese history from personal experience, speaking to students about ‘the real experiences we faced during the occupation’. ‘We want to teach all the facts, the truth’, one teacher put it, ‘but up till now, there are no resources to do this with, so we are teaching what we know, from our experience’. Several survey respondents noted that the widespread practice of teaching from experience was leading to an inconsistent curriculum.

When asked to identify the major challenges or difficulties facing teachers of East Timorese history, 75% of respondents cited the lack of a formal curriculum and associated materials such as teacher manuals, textbooks for students and reference material for lesson preparation. Many noted that they were in fact teaching world history, rather than East Timorese content, as a result of these problems. The lack of adequate teacher training was identified by 15% as their key problem, some noting an urgent need for the Ministry of Education to provide training workshops for history teachers.

As the example of Vanuatu (below) shows, these practical issues can be addressed through a combination of external funding for curriculum development, local participation in the process, and the assistance of the former colonial government in translating textbooks for multi-language environments. While these practical problems pose grave mid-term challenges, there are broader post-independence tensions over history that may have more significance in the long term. These include divisive debates over history and identity, intergenerational tensions over Timorese historiography, and the difficult cultural legacies of Portuguese and Indonesian rule.

### **Symbolic challenges: Timor-Leste’s ‘history wars’**

As I have argued elsewhere (Leach 2008) surveys of East Timorese tertiary students demonstrate the comparative strength of East Timorese history in measurements of national pride<sup>4</sup>. But despite the high level of popular pride in East Timorese history, political tensions within the modern nationalist movement continue to pose difficulties for writing the national history. It is likely that the very centrality of the resistance to East Timorese nationalism has resulted in considerable political conflict over the symbolic *ownership* of that history: over who is included, excluded, recognised and acknowledged in the central narrative of *funu*, and also, how younger people can feel part of the national story. Most of post-independence crises and tensions in East Timor have contained strong element of dispute over the ownership of this historical narrative, including the political-military crisis of 2006.

A range of interconnected ‘history wars’ have created ongoing challenges for writing a history curriculum since independence. For some Timorese, writing the national history is still too controversial a

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<sup>2</sup> All respondents (n=69) were teachers whose weekly workload included at least two hours of history. Thirty-two primary teachers (Years One–Six) were surveyed, along with 18 pre-secondary (Years Seven–Nine) and 19 secondary (Years Ten–12) teachers. I would like to thank the Catholic Teacher Training Institute, Baucau, for its invaluable assistance in conducting this research.

<sup>3</sup> The most commonly cited sourced (15% of respondents) was the CNRM publication *Overview of the history of the struggle of East Timor* (Pereira 1994). Some 20% of pre-secondary and secondary teachers were still using the Indonesian curriculum (mainly for world history resources), though some noted that they had compiled other resources to use in conjunction with this. Other cited sources included the Bahasa version of East Timor: the hidden war (Franke 1976), general world history texts and even the Portuguese colonial-era text *Timor na historia de Portugal* (Oliveira 1949).

<sup>4</sup> 81% (2002) and 76% (2007) reported feeling “very proud” of East Timorese history, compared to feeling “very proud” of democracy (51%, 36%); of East Timor’s distinctive culture (70, 69%); and the “fair and equal treatment of all groups in society” (67%,50%). The impact of the 2006 crisis was evident in the 2007 figures.

task, with the tensions over the divisive civil-war period, divisions within the independence movement and the collaboration of segments of an occupied civilian population still too close at hand. As one Timorese educator put it (interview, 16 November 2004), reconciliation between the parties to the civil war in 1975—Fretilin and UDT—is incomplete<sup>5</sup>, despite the formation of the united-front CNRM in 1987 (transformed into CNRT in 1998). Others note the ongoing tension between Fretilin and former CNRT figures over the symbolic ‘ownership’ of the resistance, and its narrative of national liberation. On one hand, some political actors clearly feel that the importance of Fretilin resistance in the late 1970s and early 1980s has been neglected in favour of a more unifying and politically palatable emphasis on the subsequent CNRT ‘united-front’ years. Others feel FRETILIN self-styling as the inheritors of the independence struggle is too narrow and excludes too many. Some of these tensions between FRETILIN and the reconstituted CNRT can be traced to internal conflict within FALINTIL during the late resistance era (Niner 2009). There is also widely-reported popular resentment against exiled political leaders ‘taking over’ post-independence politics after having been in the diaspora during the Indonesian occupation.

Another example of these historical ‘fault lines’ is evident in intergenerational debates of nationalist historiography. For an older generation of nationalists, emphasising the long history of *funu*, the Portuguese presence is critical to East Timorese nationalism: unifying different regions against a common occupier, bringing Catholicism, and marking the nation as a distinctive grouping not only in relation to Indonesia as a whole, but, equally, to the indigenous peoples of Dutch-colonised, Protestant-influenced west Timor<sup>6</sup>. Many nationalists in a younger generation look for what they see as a more authentic postcolonial identity, looking primarily to its Melanesian or indigenous roots, and more interested in the commonalities with west Timor. As one interviewee put it (Leach 2006: 232), ‘I would prefer to study indigenous history, not related to colonialism. East Timor’s history itself; the local things’.

It is also true that the youth-dominated civilian and clandestine resistance remains comparatively neglected in the nationalist memorials to the independence struggle (see Leach 2009). While the 12 November anniversary of the Santa Cruz massacre is now a public holiday, dedicated to the victims of the massacre (National Youth Day), and there is a recently instituted Santa Cruz medal, it is notable that there is still no formal national monument on or near the Santa Cruz site, despite some parliamentary discussion of the idea when the public holiday was declared in 2004. The significance of this site to the East Timorese independence struggle cannot be overstated, as it was the footage of the massacre in 1991 that put East Timor’s plight firmly back on the world stage.

These existing tensions over East Timorese history were in 2006 overlaid with a new and—in Dili at least—bitter divide. The relatively short lived but intense political-military crisis of 2006 was also in part a chapter in the ‘history wars’. Among other causes, rifts within the FDTL between younger recruits from the western districts and senior F-FDTL commanders from the eastern districts appeared to be exacerbated by comments disrespecting the contribution of ‘westerners’ to East Timor’s liberation struggle. This issue is now greatly complicated by the association of ‘east’ and ‘west’ with political cleavages within the former independence movement.

One final issue might be described as a lack of confidence and competence in historical methodologies, compounded by legacies of internal division after 24 years of resistance under extremely difficult circumstances. Thus the view is commonly heard that ‘we can’t write our own history because everyone disagrees’. For many educators I have interviewed, history is simply considered ‘too hot to handle’. There is a related and influential view that history should not be written by the East Timorese actors themselves, as the outcomes will be ‘biased’. Some feel the solution is for people from outside to collect the information, to try to be objective and diplomatic, and to bring the two sides to a ‘middle ground’. While there may indeed be a supporting role for external curriculum developers, this view highlights a broad lack of confidence in writing national history. As one teacher put it, ‘for me, this is not the right time to write history, maybe leave it for another 20 years. This is one of [the] reasons the history

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<sup>5</sup> “Where to start? It will be necessary to be diplomatic with Portugal and Indonesia. When it comes to the civil war in 1975, the parties still exist. And some of the Balibo parties—UDT, Apodeti, Kota, Trabalhista—I don’t why you’d give them an opportunity as they brought East Timor to a terrible time. But this is part of democracy, so fine. It will be a controversial issue, very sensitive. So when you start talking history, you come to a sensitive issue.”

<sup>6</sup> As Jose Ramos-Horta once put it, ‘If you take away Portuguese language and religion, there is no such thing as East Timor’ (cited in Chesterman 2001).

curriculum has not been done, it's too controversial'. These issues require deeper thinking about the role of history in post-conflict situations.

### **Thinking about post-conflict history**

It should first be noted that difficulties in writing the national history in East Timor are common to post-conflict societies. As in Bosnia and Kosovo, East Timor is not alone in having to replace the history component of otherwise retained textbooks, following national independence (Höpken 2001, 3). Similarly, several post-conflict societies have suspended history education in favour of a less controversial and general focus on human rights education and civics curricula (Cole and Barsalou 2006, 12). This pattern evident in Rwanda and Bosnia is already apparent in Timor-Leste, with civic education curricula development far in advance of history curriculum development (see Leach 2007). Some post-conflict countries have gone further, and chosen to ignore the recent past of violent conflict in newly developed national history textbooks (including Mozambique and Cambodia), or have openly postponed inclusion (Rwanda) (see Höpken 2001, 2).

A key issue in post-conflict societies is how the role of the history curriculum is conceived. As Höpken (2001, 12) notes, peace-building and reconciliation will not necessarily be promoted by curricula primarily designed to promote officially sanctioned versions of national identity and foster loyalty to the state. Equally, teaching students core historical methods of critical inquiry, such as the capacity to evaluate the merits of competing historical claims, may not be compatible with the goals of official histories which seek to inculcate 'national values' and loyalty.

This is a critical issue for Timor-Leste, particularly as it seeks to move on from the authoritarian epistemology of the New Order regime's approach to national history as a single, authorized, pan-archipelagic narrative. Indeed, understanding historical knowledge as a process of evaluating competing historical claims, and teaching students the processes of gathering evidence to test them are essential skills of democratic citizenship. As Cole and Barsalou note (2006, 1) teaching these skills of critical inquiry may be a more effective focus in resource-poor environments than developing new history textbooks. Yet this focus can also attract opposition from new ruling elites and policy makers, as '...few post-conflict societies are ready to accept an approach that promotes critical thinking, since it is often perceived as flying in the face of traditions that respect expertise, seniority, and authority and promote group honor as more important than any forensic truth' (Cole and Barsalou 2006, 10)

In Timor-Leste, the link between history curriculum development and transitional justice is also a critical one. Certainly, the failure to implement the recommendations of CAVR report strongly parallels the challenges in writing the national history. Thorny and highly politicised debates over justice and reconciliation, along with questions of how to deal with legacies of internal division, and the relationship with Indonesia, are common to both challenges. Both point to a present lack of political unity and will to deal with the complex and divisive issues of historical justice. While the CAVR has produced a good range of educational materials, as the Commission itself notes (CAVR 2008, 39), *Chega!* was not written directly for the classroom, and still needs to be 're-presented...appropriately for different levels and subject area'. This is important, as the socialisation of CAVR findings can only truly take place at a national level through their production as curricula. At present, CAVR materials are left to the discretion of individual teachers to incorporate in classroom practice. This is regrettable, as representative personal stories – of the sort employed by CAVR report – are considered to be very helpful methodologies for dealing with complex issues of historical justice in school curricula (Cole and Barsalou 2006, 10).

International experience suggests key preconditions for using school history education as a resource for peace-building include: a favorable post-conflict environment in which violence has ended, a strong commitment to peace-building from political elites, a sense of common national values, and a general social consensus for reconciliation (see Höpken 2001, 5-8). In Timor-Leste, many of these basic issues are still unsettled, with a highly fractious political elite, and anti-system groups which resort to techniques of resistance, and routinely question the state's monopoly on legitimate force in times of crises. The 2006 'east-west' crisis was a clear setback to this wider process, as are the divisive debates over reconciliation, forgiveness and justice.

The role of a history curriculum development in nation-building is also a critical one. Compulsory schooling is of course a key site of integration around national values and identities. Gellner even goes so far as to argue 'the monopoly of legitimate education: is more important than the classic

Weberian monopoly of legitimate violence’ (Gellner 1983, Tawil and Harley 2004, 9-10). A key issue is how to promote a social cohesion that is respectful of diversity (Tawil and Harley 2004, 4), and promote a cohesive sense of national identity, without exacerbating social tensions. As was abundantly in the 2006 crisis, Timor-Leste’ past can easily be recruited to the purposes of creating discord; highlighting the urgent need to promote social cohesion.

Finally, compulsory education is also a key site of for promoting a post-colonial cultural identity, in the wake of colonialism and civil conflict As Tawil and Harley argue (2004, 20), Mozambique is a good example of a society seeking to assert a post-independence national identity which also accommodates a diverse multilingual , multicultural society. However, as Rønning notes (cited in Tawil and Harley, 20), accommodating multiple languages and local identities may be seen by some nationalists as a form of tribalism which question the project of national unity. The key questions in this process of promoting an inclusive national identity in compulsory education concern: who is consulted about these issues, how non-elite voices are heard, and the ways conflict is dealt with (Tawil and Harley 2004, 19). Where there are ongoing divisive issues, there may be a clear role for outsiders in this process of curriculum development, indeed, this was the ‘circuit breaker’ in reforming the national curriculum after conflict in Rwanda (Cole and Barsalou, 7)<sup>7</sup>.

## **Alternatives models for curriculum development**

### *Participatory models*

These practical and wider historiographical difficulties are factors in the slow progress of history curriculum development. While the basic question of funding and resources is not to be underestimated, useful alternative models have already been pursued in other fields of curriculum development in East Timor. For example, in May 2004 a national conference on the civic education curriculum was held, involving some 200 educators from around the country. Organised by Timor Aid, a local NGO, under a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Education, the three-day conference employed a ‘participatory method’ to deliberate upon and identify the broad content and principles to inform the curriculum. Later in the conference, specific workshops developed curriculum topics from these wider principles. These were then divided into sub-topics to be developed by smaller curriculum content teams after the conference. The goal was to produce a ‘bottom-up’ curriculum in response to the ‘top-down’ models of civic education that characterised the Indonesian syllabus. According to the organisers, the participatory method offered many tangible benefits as a training exercise for teachers, as well as offering an important form of legitimation of the curriculum, as teachers and members of the wider civil society had a feeling of ownership, which was likely to promote greater commitment in the implementation phase (interview, Alex Gusmão, Deputy Director, Timor Aid, 16 November 2004). The curriculum was released in 2009. A similar methodology may prove useful in developing history curricula. First, it would allow oral and regional perspectives to come to the fore, minimising the risk of these being marginalised in a centralised, ‘Dili-centric’, top-down model. Second, provided they are well facilitated according to pre-agreed principles of dispute resolution, the deliberative processes fostered by the participatory model may assist in managing some of the more sensitive, controversial themes inherent to aspects of the history curriculum.

### *Vanuatu curriculum*

Another model that may offer a useful example to history curriculum developers in East Timor is the Vanuatu national high school history curriculum, *Histri blong yumi long Vanuatu: an educational resource* (2005). The parallels with East Timor are instructive. Vanuatu is a Melanesian nation characterised by high levels of linguistic diversity, including three official languages (English, French and Bislama). Like Tetum-Dili, Bislama is yet to be fully standardised, and the languages of two former colonial powers have left a socio-linguistic division among the educated population. Indeed, the pre-independence division between Anglophone support for immediate independence and Francophone backing for a gradual transition broadly mirrors the 1974–75 positions of Fretilin and UDT.

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<sup>7</sup> However, as Cole and Barsalou also note, the involvement of “implicated outsiders” can create a backlash (2006, 7).

Developed with funding from the Ford Foundation, *Histri blong yumi long Vanuatu* was produced as a collaboration between local and external historians, affiliated respectively with the Vanuatu cultural centre and the United States Peace Corps. Following its publication in English in 2005, the French government agreed to finance the text's translation for the Francophone community, which comprises some 40% of the high school student population. The content also offers some useful directions for curriculum developers in East Timor. While adopting an essentially 'Western' historiographical approach, the Vanuatu text nonetheless seeks to marry formal and informal historiography where appropriate by including oral traditions and traditional cultural interpretations of key historical events. For example, missionary reports sit side by side with local oral histories in the discussion of the eruption of a volcano in 1913. In this and other ways, the Vanuatu curriculum combines linear, social science approaches with more traditional 'circular' approaches to history and time, combining formal education with aspects of traditional cultural knowledge.

Framed in terms of understanding identity, and developing pride in indigenous history and customs, the Vanuatu curriculum seeks to break down colonial stereotypes, while also developing an understanding of the way certain aspects of colonial cultures have been embraced through historical contact. It also seeks to minimise residual tensions and divisions between Anglophone and Francophone communities by addressing the different perspectives and attitudes on either side of the Anglo-French division during the independence struggle, noting for example that Francophones felt threatened by the independence party's original policy of adopting English as the sole language of instruction in schools and that the offer of French citizenship appealed to many Francophones.<sup>8</sup> It also seeks to emphasise that these particular legacies of colonialism were serious barriers to Melanesian unity in the struggle for independence. Student exercises also encourage the development of historical knowledge through oral and local sources, asking students, for example, to draw family trees, and to interview village elders about traditional local historical knowledge and land tenure systems. As in East Timor, the latter issue highlights the notion that historical and contemporary events are linked, and that the past is ever-present.

## Conclusion

A range of serious challenges besets the task of history curriculum development in East Timor. Nonetheless, there are useful contemporary models to draw upon, such as that of Vanuatu, in which external curriculum developers collaborated closely with local historians. Further, the adoption of a tailored version of the 2,500-page CAVR report as an interim secondary curriculum would fill a particular gap in the syllabus by covering the period from 1974 to 1999, which has hitherto been avoided by the few history curriculum development initiatives undertaken.

Finally, it is also critical, in the long term, that the cultural heritage landscape in East Timor truly recognises all key participants in the resistance. The 'built environment' of monuments and memorials is critical to the way history is 'lived' in the nation. While the monument to the Falintil warriors at Metinaro is an inspiring national memorial, there is as yet no equivalent public monument to the civil resistance, commemorating the critical roles of Renetil and other civilian organisations in the struggle for independence (see Leach 2009). This is a particularly important symbolic issue in light of the intergenerational tensions that have proven one of the key fault lines in East Timorese politics since 2002. In light of recent upheavals the East Timorese state needs to demonstrate its wider and official recognition of all those who participated in the struggle for independence: young and old, east and west.

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<sup>8</sup> Student exercises reflecting on this topic ask Anglophone students to imagine being forced to go to school in French, and vice versa.

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