

The FRETILIN literacy manual of 1974-75: an exploration of early nationalist themes

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Throughout the short-lived decolonisation era from April 1974 to December 1975, early East Timorese nationalists became adept at using familiar cultural forms, images and words to carry new political messages. Influenced by Lusophone African nationalists, FRETILIN adopted the position enunciated by Amílcar Cabral that anti-colonial nationalism should draw upon popular and traditional values, reframing them as the characteristics of unified modern nation or 'people', to transcend the local identities of different ethno-linguistic groups. Cabral (1979, 59) expressed this task as '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'. These dual features characterised much of East Timorese nationalism from 1974-5, introducing distinctive local notes, despite the clear parallels with the positions of fraternal anti-colonial movements (see Hill 2002).

While the nationalist generic *Maubere* was the prime example, early nationalist poets such as Borja da Costa, and songwriters Abílio and Afonso Araújo also converted traditional East Timorese songs with newly penned nationalist lyrics. Drawing on East Timorese experiences of Portuguese colonialism, these became vehicles for depicting the injustices of colonial social relations, and the case for independence, such as the anthem *Foho Ramelau*, which urged East Timorese to 'Awake! Take the reins of your own horse / Awake! Take control of our land'. Written in Tetun, these new forms of popular nationalist culture combined traditional form with modern nationalist themes. The image of a hand holding the reins of a horse (*kaer-rasik kuda-tali*) would go on to become the FRETILIN logo of the period (da Silva 2011, 64). Appealing to rural Timorese, Tetun songs also became popular in non-Tetun speaking areas, contributing to the association of Tetun with a nascent national culture. The FRETILIN publication *Timor-Leste: Jornal do Povo Maubere* (1 November 1975, 5) noted that 1,000 discs of *Foho Ramelau* and 'other revolutionary songs' were being produced by Abílio Araújo, with the help of the Committee of Angola in the Netherlands. With levels of illiteracy at 90 per cent and a traditional oral culture, the use of vernacular Tetun and other local languages in campaigning allowed educated nationalists to connect with the non-elite, and quickly saw FRETILIN support rise in the districts, reaching out beyond the small elite contesting power in Dili. Critical to this mode of political education was the FRETILIN literacy campaign.

The FRETILIN Literacy Campaign

Supporting this oral process of *conscientização política* (political education), the FRETILIN literacy campaign drew on the radical pedagogy of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, integrating basic lessons in literacy with forms of nationalist political education. Developed by António Carvarinho, Francisco Borja da Costa and others, the literacy manual, *Rai Timur Rai Ita Niang* (Timor is Our Country), is a critical document of early East Timorese nationalism, representing one of the most important and widely distributed forms of nationalist political education during the decolonisation period. As a literacy tool, the manual allowed volunteer educators to take their new adult students 'from a simple identification of animals and learning to form letters, to a course in the nature of colonialism and the way forward to independence' (CIET 1974, 14). The newly formed National Union of Timorese Students (UNETIM – *União Nacional dos Estudantes dos Timores*), created by FRETILIN leaders Sahe, Hamis Bassarewan and Roque Rodrigues, provided many of the literacy campaigners in the field (da Silva 2011, 84). One early Popular Organization of East Timorese Women (*Organização Popular de Mulher Timor* – OPMT) member, Aurora Ximenes, recalled the early phases of FRETILIN political education campaigns with the general population (interview with author 2010).

FRETILIN was established and it set up a structure to go and campaign....they had to find delegates to send to every district to the *aldeia* level, to take FRETILIN's political program to the whole population to get them involved in the independence movement, to overcome 500 years of poverty where only a few people were educated and the majority lived in darkness

...Other groups joined us, like Vicente Sahe's group. The first literacy and political education pilot program was implemented in Aileu and the second was done in Bucoli where they also set up a training centre for young people to do political education....From the centre they were divided up into groups which then spread out into the districts.

The approach of the campaign emphasised literacy as a form of political socialisation for independence, and as a course in cultural decolonisation. In 1975, the Department of Education and Culture of FRETILIN declared in its literacy supplement - distributed in the *Jornal De Povo Maubere* - that literacy itself was a 'political act': 'Literacy is to be made aware of the realities of our country. Literacy is not only teaching to read and write. Literacy is, above all, a form of political awareness' (1 November 1975, 1, author's trans.). The act of educating the rural populace in Tetun was a powerful nationalist statement in itself, as education had previously only been permitted in Portuguese, notwithstanding one important decolonisation era program to 'Timorise' the curriculum, the *Project for Restructuring Teaching in Timor* (Projecto de Reestruturação de Ensino em Timor – PRET) led by the Portuguese Lieutenant Antonio Barbedo Magalhaes, later a leader of the Portuguese solidarity movement.¹ In the field in 1975, FRETILIN adopted a flexible 'mother tongue' approach in practice, while emphasising the central status of Tetun as essential for 'building a solid national unity'.

To be effective, literacy should be given in the mother tongue. In our country we suggest that it is in Tetun. However, comrades from other areas can adapt the general idea here to the mother tongue that zone... In proposing not just Tetun we are aware that more than 50 percent of the Mau Bere People speak Tetun, and [we are] essentially building a solid NATIONAL UNITY (1 November 1975, 1, author's trans.)

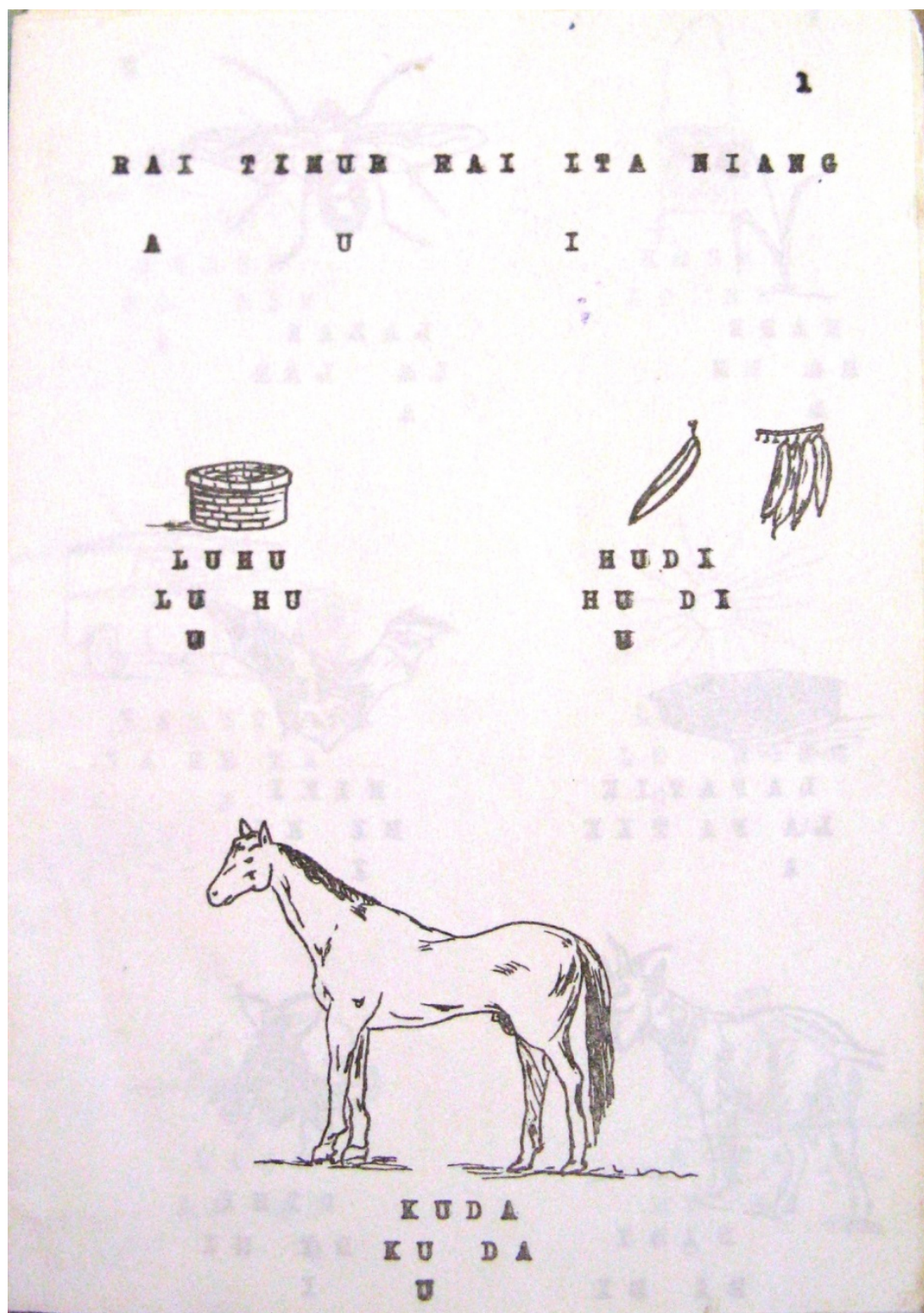
¹ Lesser known in the English speaking world, the PRET was Authorized by Governor Lemos Pires' order of 20 January 1975, the project was a joint Portuguese/Timorese plan for decolonization of the education system. A product of the Coordinating Group for the Reform of Education in Portuguese Timor (GCRET), which included Roque Rodrigues, and Sahe's wife Dulce 'Wewe' Cruz; the project was notable for its cross-party representation, including FRETILIN's Antonia Carvarinho, UDT's Manuel Baptist, and Joao Martins of APODETI. Seeking to decolonise the curriculum, the project released a pamphlet entitled 'Thinking of the problem of schools is a right and a duty', conducted surveys of teaching practices, reviewed textbooks, and held conferences including the 'week of teaching primary' in March 1975, attended by 50 teachers from across the territory. The UDT coup disrupted the planned retraining programs, with hundreds of teachers enrolled for courses scheduled for 11 August 1975 (see Barbedo Magalhaes 2004).



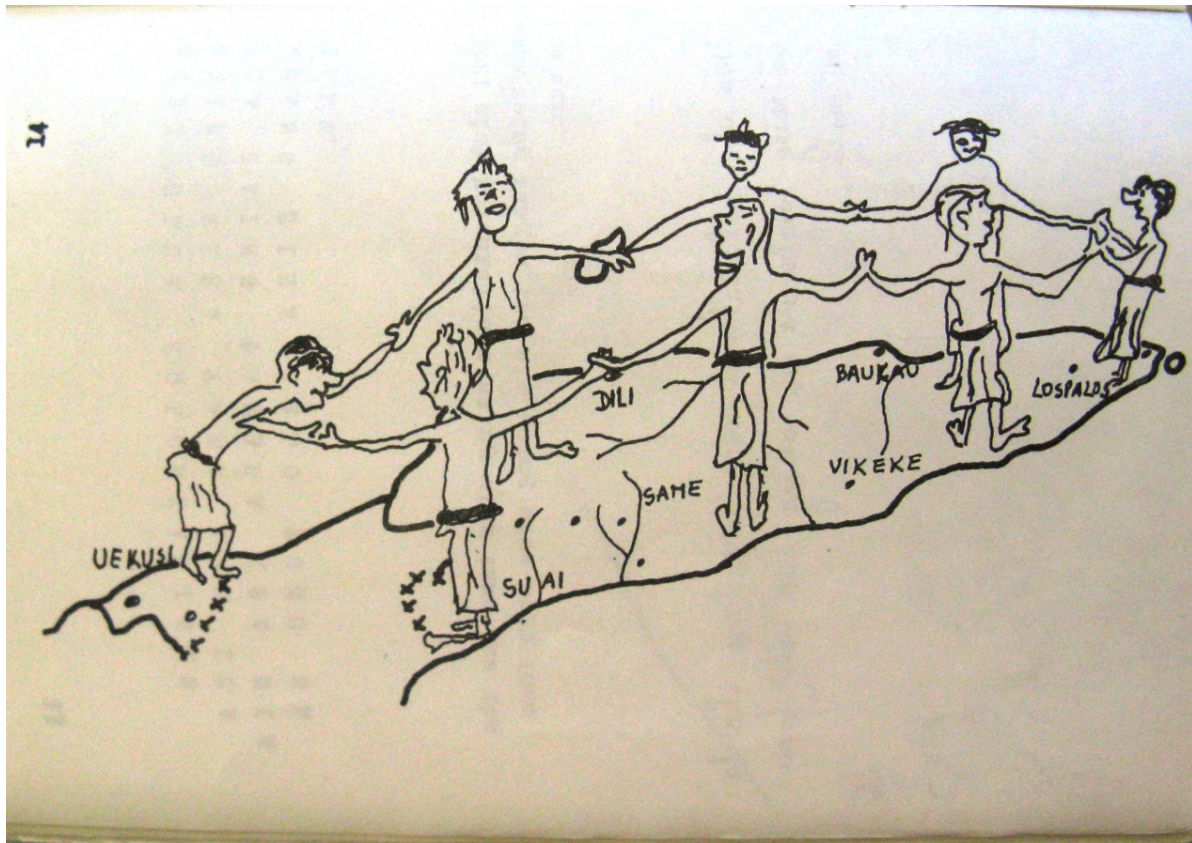
Though designed in Portuguese Timor, the literacy pamphlet was printed and produced by the *Casa Dos Timores* in Lisbon, bearing their stamp on the inner cover. In a contemporary note from her personal records, Jill Jolliffe (1975, inner leaf) notes that FRETILIN literacy schools were often built by villagers themselves, though demand outweighed the capacity to build. This shortage was similarly reflected in the ratio of books to students, which she estimated at 1 per 50 students in July 1975.

With a cover depicting ordinary *Maubere* women and children in the fields, the literacy booklet began with simple words for familiar animals and plants, for example, with sun and cat depicted in drawings. Each group of referents emphasised different vowel and consonant sounds, before moving on to traditional East Timorese objects of cultural significance, including the *uma* (house), *surik* (sword) and *rama* (bow) (*Casa dos Timores* 1975, 1-4).

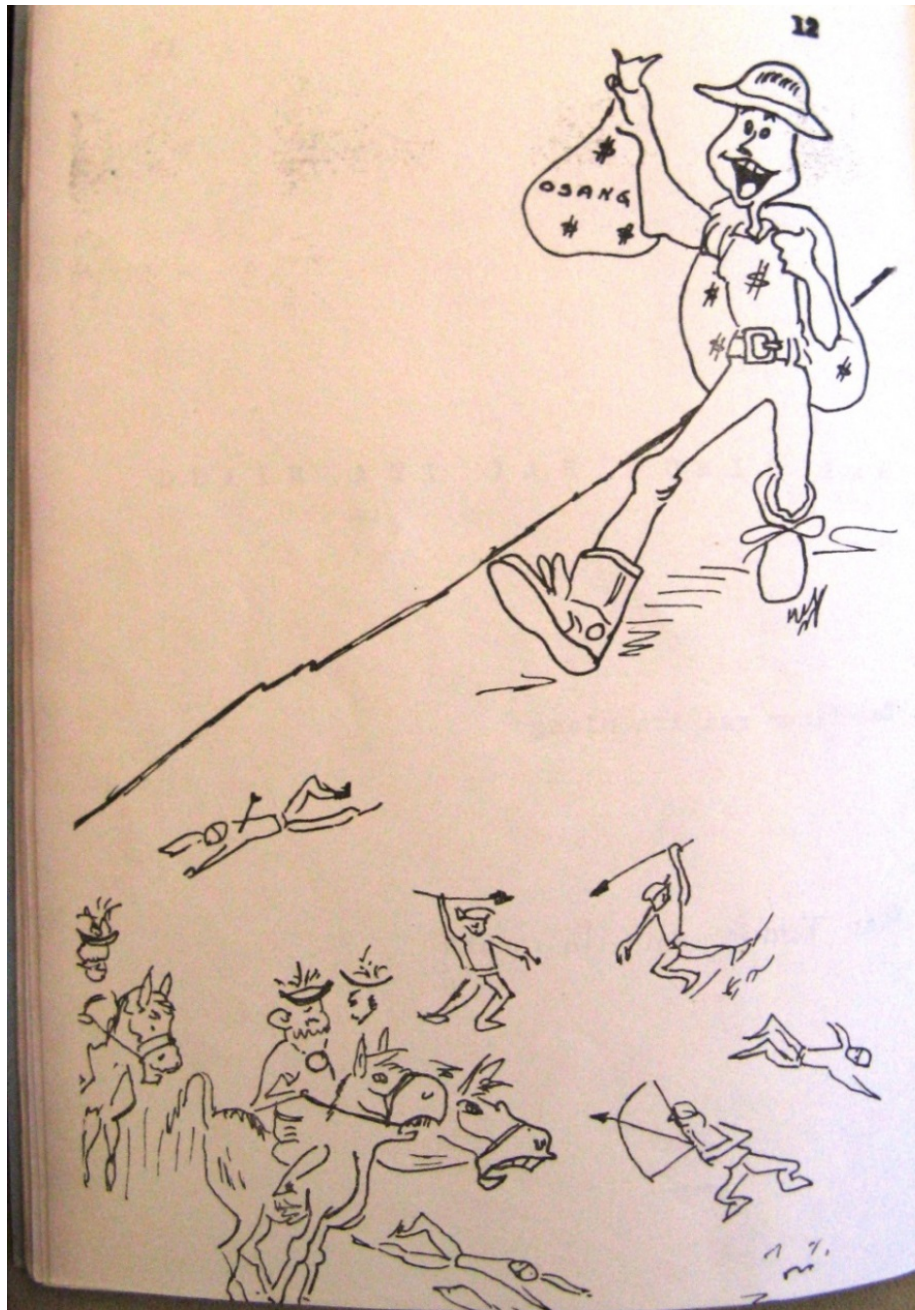
² All images with permission FRETILIN/National Library of Australi.



Notably, the manual then included a map of Timor-Leste, allowing illiterate subsistence farmers, perhaps for the first time, to visualize the national territory, and, with district capitals marked, to find their own place in it (10). This simple device, which contrasted with the maps of Portugal in colonial school rooms, provided a new national frame of reference to the literacy exercises. Also printed on the inner cover of the literacy handbook were the Tetun lyrics to 'Foho Ramelau', which Jolliffe's handwritten note (1975) indicates was then 'a defacto national anthem sung by people everywhere'.



Following these basic instructions in literacy, the remainder of the booklet used more advanced literacy lessons to explain the nature of Portuguese colonialism, and urge the need for national unity. On page 12 a *malai* (foreigner) is represented carrying a bag of money 'Osang \$\$\$' away, while East Timorese warriors fight each other with traditional weapons. The accompanying text declared 'in the past colonialists entered our land because our ancestors fought amongst each other' (12-13). The following page returned again to the map, this time showing East Timorese from different districts holding hands, with the text 'Timorese came together to free our land' (14-15). This contrasted notably with maps of Portugal, depicted on the wall of a colonial classroom (32), and again in a military office, where East Timorese labourers are being underpaid (24).



The booklet then examined colonial social relations in the same manner, with images depicting scenes from colonial life, and a facing page of short text in capital, lower case and running writing. For example, beside an image contrasting urban and rural life in Portuguese Timor, the text declares (16-17):

To free your land, come together against colonialism. Our colonialists have stone houses, cars, many things. Dirt never enters their houses. We Timorese are hungry, unhealthy, why? Colonialism comes to feed on the fertile land and becomes fat.

In another scene, beside an image of a Portuguese driving on a road, and an East Timorese labourer building it, the pamphlet tells students (18-21):

You dig roads for other people, you build stone houses for other people, you sweat, die, become sick...Along the roads come the thieves with your things. We don't have cars, nor stone houses. Our stomachs are hungry.

Other aspects of Portugal's development record in the territory come in for scrutiny. In a colonial classroom, the lack of respect for East Timorese culture and language is highlighted, with a fearsome teacher berating a student (32-33):

Colonialism prevents you speaking your language. Our land is far from their land...our fathers are different, our faces are different, our land is different, we have different languages. In school, they teach you that you cannot do traditional dances, you cannot sing traditional songs.

In another lesson, a Portuguese doctor is presented beside the text 'colonialism gives you medicine so you can continue working for them' (26-7). The focus on forced labour continued with an image of a guard wielding a *palmatoria* (whip) at workers, with the text 'colonialism makes your body tired... and asks for money to pay tax. Because of this you are still born poor' (22-5). Following a similar section on agricultural production in the colony, the text concludes with a reminder of the wars of resistance. An image of an early Portuguese invader firing on traditional warriors is accompanied by the text (34-5): 'In the past Timorese were free, but colonialists saw sandalwood, they lied to our fathers, who knew they lied, but were scared by their guns. Our forefathers did not give up, and many times raised their arms against them.'

According to the instructions supplied in the literacy supplement, field instructors were also advised to ask political questions in their teaching practice. For example, as students learned the word for horse '*Kuda*', they could ask (*Timor-Leste: Jornal do Povo Maubere* 1 November 1975, 2, author's trans):

Who travels by horse...why do the Maubere people do not have a car? Speaking of cavalry: was there an army before the arrival of Portuguese colonialism? In the Manu Fahi war did the army serve the interests of the Timorese people? What is FALINTIL?...Why did the Timorese people take up arms against the reactionaries and traitors of our country? etc. etc.

In practice, the literacy campaigns fulfilled another practical function for FRETILIN, as newly accomplished *letrados* (literate) became party secretaries in the villages (Hill 2002, 114), demonstrating the organisational aspects of nationalist education. For their part, led by major land-holders, the UDT found the *alfabetização* campaigns threatening to their conceptions of social order, and likely to cause unrest among their workers (Fernandes 2011, 13). FRETILIN's grass roots literacy and political education campaigns also confronted traditional gender roles (see Leach 2014).

Conclusion

Both FRETILIN and the UDT proposed Portuguese as the official language of an independent state. In FRETILIN's case, their language policy was extended by a commitment to 'develop Tetun' further as a *lingua franca* for nation-building purposes, and calling for a 'program of study' into Tetun language, with a view to its eventual adoption (FRETILIN 1975). In 1974 and 1975 however, it is likely that only some 50 per cent of the East Timorese populations spoke Tetun (Ramos-Horta 1987, 205), compared with a contemporary usage well in excess of 80 per cent. It is notable, in light of recent debates in Timor-Leste, that FRETILIN actively countenanced a 'mother tongue' approach in the field in 1974-75, as a practical 'backup' measure likely to encourage literacy development. The overwhelming emphasis, however, remained on achieving literacy in Tetun. Throughout the decolonisation period, and into the period of the *zonas libertadas* (liberated zones) under FRETILIN control until 1978, FRETILIN maintained what was effectively a *lingua franca* policy in its literacy campaigns, based on the idea that literacy would come easier when students already had command of a spoken language. There is little doubt that these campaigns contributed to the development of new forms of solidarity critical to the early development of national identity. Reinforced by Tetun's subsequent adoption for liturgical use by the Catholic Church in the 1980s, the early FRETILIN literacy campaign assisted the association of East Timorese nationalism with the Tetun language.

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