

## **AARE Conference: Fremantle December 2001**

### **Crossing Borders: New Frontiers for Educational Research**

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#### **Reconnecting family histories:**

#### **striving to link communities with Timor Lorosa'e.**

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#### **Presenter: Mrs. Nancy de Almeida Ezequiel.**

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This paper documents research in the new frontier of educational work – particularly the educational possibilities of reconnecting expatriates of East Timor with the citizens of the new independent state of Timor Lorosa'e. The two researchers are crossing the borders of their communities and work environments to recreate knowledge aimed towards reconciling historical differences. This process of researching is community-driven, cyclical and reflective. Of significance the researchers see their work as hastening cautiously whilst striving to maintain community focus. The research is a developing narrative through biography and family history with cooperation of the East Timorese Cultural Centre (ETCC).

#### ***Research guidance***

Initially Nancy requested that we meet with Sr Josephine Mitchell – to ensure that the research had her approval and directing influence. This work is connected to the creation of curriculum materials that the Mary McKillop Institute of East Timorese Studies (MMIETS) is

publishing for schools in Timor Lorosa'e (East Timor). This curriculum development is crossing borders and has created the first widely accessible materials in the Tetun language for Timorese children.

The researchers are contributing to the work of MMIETS by collaborating to benefit their work in Timor. Originally this relationship between the researcher and MMIETS began with the long-term goal of Sydney-based Timorese community members returning to teach in Timor to strengthen the Tetun language. Further new frontiers are developing by looking at the role of recently established educational organisations – from the Timorese form of orphanages to other adult non-formal education for community development.

This research will bring to the fore educational tools for reconciling and unifying communities by bringing shared understanding of histories. In different ways both the Timorese that stayed and those who became expatriates have suffered for decades. One cannot expect that animosity and forms of mistrust will not emerge from the returning of the more fortunate (?) "wealthier" expatriates (strangers) – however as the "president elect" (Xanana Gusmao) has stated "reconciliation will take generations and we must begin with one step".

There are several metaphors relating to the exodus of Timorese, one is of *leaving the crocodile* that connects to many legends of the land. There are many variations of the traditional story about:

"According to this creation story, a young boy came across a sick crocodile – burning in the sun. The boy took pity on the crocodile and carried it to the sea.

To repay the boys' kindness, the crocodile took the boy, as was his wish, on many long journeys across the sea, carrying the boy on his back. Despite being tempted to eat the boy, the crocodile kept his promise and let the boy ride safely. They journeyed until the crocodile became old. When he realised he was dying, the crocodile said to the boy, "I will change into a land where your descendants will live from my fruits, as payment for your kindness. And according to Timorese tradition, that crocodile became the island of Timor, and the Timorese are the descendants of that boy. (Wise: 2001:4)

The story of *leaving the crocodile* is told through an exhibition of the same name currently held at the Liverpool Regional Museum. The many stories are metaphors for East Timor and the generosity of spirit found in the people. (Two versions of the story are illustrated and published by MMIETS and another written by Cliff Morris (1984) "Legends and Poems from the Land of the Sleeping Crocodile"). The exhibition emphasises the achievements of the Timorese diaspora.

### ***Crossing***

Luis Cardoso presents another example of expatriate Timorese life. He presents the metaphor of 'crossing' as an important theme in the life of Timorese who were moving across water and cultures. Cardoso (2000:118) briefly outlines the life of Timorese prior to the twenty-four years of Indonesian rule in Timor. *The Crossing* is a story of the lives of many Timorese – and the idea of *crossing* is virtually synonymous to the lifestyle of the expatriate surviving in another country. Families separated through violence (oppression and war) and those fortunate to have travelled prior to the invasion lucky to be studying abroad – without first hand knowledge of the horror. Nancy de Almeida came to Australia on a ship

late in 1975, landing in Darwin. Her family were more fortunate than many others – as many families had relations who did not escape the death and destruction of twenty-three years of fighting a hidden war against Indonesia. Expatriates (like Nancy) are torn about returning to visit or live in Timor Lorosa'e. The emotional reality of returning to see the old order destroyed and a new order emerging, of meeting (old) neighbours and talking about who has returned and who is lost (forever missing?). Of again seeing the landscape that suffered not only deforestation and napalm in the high mountain country – but more extensively - recent fire and destruction by the departing militia on their circuitous westward exodus out of Timor in September 1999.

Returning to visit family will be a painful experience. Nancys' mother and brothers have returned to Timor – and have spent time renovating her family home near the Cathedral in Dili. Her brother Aires has initiated a Timorese-based NGO (known as FUTO) to re-establish skills training for men and women. In 2001 they imported machinery and trainers from Australia and employed over fifty Timorese building School furniture – a contract that the UN thought would have to be filled offshore. The sustainability of the employment is one of the prominent issues – to generate income for families and to enable men and women to have pride in their productive work. Establishing community development programs is important – being able to make sustainable programs without financing from the global institutions – such as the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank is another important matter.

The educational projects we are working towards are varied and I find myself crossing boundaries of my experience to facilitate whatever is required to develop these projects. The following describes the biographical work with Nancy de Almeida Ezequiel.

### ***Biographical project – a woman from the village***

Nancy chose the title 'a woman from the village' as a reflection of her origins. The project was intended to document the "life of a cultural educator and the East Timorese Cultural Centre". To date this research is essentially a biographical study of the Almeida family and friends of the Cultural Centre - the background of the father from Goa, the mother from Timor. The life of Nancy growing up and at school in the 1950s, also at work and leaving Timor in 1975. The writing includes the following themes:

- A woman from the village
- Photographic resources – plants for kitchen and medicine
- Childhood memories
- Religion: animism, the spirit world and Catholicism
- Punishment
- Schooling – Soibada and Malaysia
- Employment – East Timor: Shipping Clerk, Commerce and Bank Officer
- Exodus to Darwin 1975
- Employment – Australia: Immigration and Welfare Officer
- Living in Brazil
- My fathers' influence on my life
- Towards an East Timorese Cultural Centre
- Learning through listening to clients
- Asylum seekers
- Relearning Tetun in grammatical form
- Values and Language Issues
- A typical week at the Cultural Centre

Nancy had studied in Malaysia for her Secondary education, and with her language competence was asked to work as an Immigration Officer in 1976 (until 1984). This meant

close relationships with the Timorese community that had escaped the trauma of the Indonesian invasion, and some from the short civil war between the UDT and Fretilin in 1975 prior to the invasion. The East Timorese Cultural Centre was established in 1984, and since that time her brothers and sisters and mother had worked tirelessly for the cultural strengthening of the community. The Cultural Centre continues to be a place where some members of the Timorese community build links for informal education and activities are organised. Entwined with the community links have been the activism - organising protests against the Indonesian Government, lobbying the Australian Government for policy change and intervention. Individual Timorese families could not advocate as a threat existed that meant family members in Timor were in danger. MMIETS took a prominent role in lobbying and advocating in collaboration with the Cultural Centre. With independence the social activities are currently classes for craftwork, language workshops for both English and Tetun, and as a tranquil place for social connectedness.

Nancy has provided a service as an advocate, a counsellor, an advisor and interpreter – whatever was needed she has networked to facilitate for the community. She chose to retire from paid work so that she could have time for her family – yet her time is always for the community. She married Luiz (a Brazilian man) in Sydney and spent seven years in Brazil (1984 to 1991), upon her return Nancy serves the Timorese community.

One of Nancy's metaphors for teaching is "the hand" as a story to valuing life and tradition for the Timorese. She explains that during Portuguese colonisation in East Timor, a barrier between the literate and the illiterate separated the people. When East Timorese came to Australia as refugees, the elders lost the important position of being ones who said everything to which the children had to bow their heads and obey. In Australia, the children speak fluent English so the elders lose control of telling them what to do. The elders feel that they have lost their role and they are no longer important.

I use the hand as a meaningful way to try to restore the elders self-esteem as follows: in one hand there are five fingers. Each finger is different and useful. If one finger is cut, the others can not manage well. One hand symbolises the many different individual Timorese but all are of a one people. The hand is to encourage the silent, elderly and illiterate with their own values to keep the culture alive for the struggle to self-determination and independence (Nancy Ezequiel, 1993).

This is one example of the moral and educational pieces that Nancy has developed to teach and counsel others in their need. In amongst the interview appointments Nancy and I meet at cultural events – e.g when Nancy gave the opening address at the Liverpool Regional Museum for the exhibition of *"Leaving the Crocodile"* – as stated earlier a metaphor for departing Timor. We also meet at MMIETS where Nancy works with her husband Luiz as a volunteer – laminating and cutting materials for school packages to be sent to Timor. Luiz is retired after many years working in Brazil and Australia.

The research is essentially narrative: interviews, transcription followed by Nancy proof reading and adjusting the text to reflect the reality of her experience. We try to meet fortnightly when possible, although teaching does limit my time, and community work does constrain hers. From this writing there are intended outcomes: a biography and stories to become childrens' readers to be sent to Timor for inclusion in classrooms and regional libraries. Nancy is also working on a book of garden plants and recipes (a traditional kitchen garden known as *kintal* or *toos ki'ik*) – a project by Nancy and MMIETS).

## ***Leaving the Crocodile***

The Timorese in Sydney have collaborated with the Institute of Cultural Studies at UWS and the Liverpool Regional Museum to present a comprehensive display of the wealth of experience and knowledge as well as suffering that is the complex history of the Timorese community in Sydney. The pride of the people who escaped to live in this country cannot be overestimated. By coincidence the de Almeida family is largely involved with the exhibition, even though Nancy requested that all Timorese community organisations be contacted to contribute. This exhibition culminates the aspirations of the community and their work towards independence over the past twenty-five years.

### ***Timorese orphanages - connecting with communities to support homeless and less advantaged families.***

My dream is to have an orphanage...like where I worked in Brazil with street kids, a priest set up an office in Germany and asked rich people to contribute,... they had four houses each with a married couple and their kids, each house had eleven or twelve children, the money paid the woman for housekeeping, as well the teachers and craftwork, and for the boys – they did nothing, so I got money to get the boys to clean the yard, and they were so happy to be paid to work. ... Later I got Brazilians to become "godmothers" and bring cakes for birthdays."

Nancy explained her dream of establishing an orphanage in Timor. This intention has directed the researcher to investigate ways to make such an idea come to fruition

There are more than 38 homes for children – internally displaced (IDs as they are referred to by the UN and NGOs) or those of families that are unable to provide adequate care in some form (of food and clothing). Even proud families require relief and support – and Timorese will send children to a home until they are able to care more fully.

(This is unlike my understandings of past Australian orphanages where those that enter probably have a remote possibility of being reunited with family). So the development of a Timorese operated orphanage is the long-term project. My "dreams" are that selected Education and Health students in Australia could one day be placed on their Professional Practice or Teaching Practice in an annexe to such institutions. The opportunity for Australian youth to work with small groups of children to learn of education and health issues from one of our nearest neighbours –a neighbour with tremendous needs.

We've made arrangements to visit and research three existing Timorese orphanages – one in the township of Dare that is managed by a Timorese woman (Lourdes), one in Maubara that is run by the Carmelites, and a third in Alto Hospital managed by Maureen Maguire (an Australian woman). The intention is to understand the way each of these homes organises the development of the children – how peer relations are involved, the educational and health aspects, and also the matter of funding. My concern and an aim of the research is that any establishment be connected to external community development employment.

### ***Researcher as The research implement***

In many ways the researcher is a participant and an instrument of Timorese educational interests. As the Timorese entrust the researcher to be part of their educational support then considerable effort will be engaged to achieve their aspirations. The researcher does not

claim to know what is the best form of educational support – but is willing to research educational practices with the Timorese guiding the research direction.

This research is leading to other involvement/interests – related to the communities and supporting the work of the FUTO organisation (Aires and Adalfredo de Almeida with other Timorese and Australians) – strengthening technical skills to develop micro-economic sustainable employment. (*How do we advise people to best benefit their projects? Empowerment and self-determination may be supported by non-local participants with caution urging them to ensure that local voices are heard*).

Here let's make a connection from present to past, to gain some perspective on the historical situation of the poor people of Timor in contrast to those with privilege. The following extract by Cardoso brings to the fore the human condition of the people after centuries of Portuguese rule:

"In a desire to justify its image as a freedom movement that would regenerate ancestral values, Fretilin chose the *maubere*, the native Timorese, as the face of the new man and restored the word to its original native, pagan sense of 'brother'. The UDT thought that giving the people such a name meant stripping them of their dignity. They felt it was wrong to make a symbol of a word that the UDT itself used to designate the uneducated; they said it was like reclaiming the new man from an ancient race, stealing Rousseau's theory of the noble savage. But everyone knew that this word, made either mythical or offensive by the opposing parties, had both a past and a profile. Domingos and Mali Mau were the personification of the *maubere*, excluded from the benefits of Portuguese colonialism, an old man's face on the body of a child, barefoot and illiterate. They never had access to education, never read any books, did not even know where Portugal was, could not speak the language, and, in the majority, despite all the missionaries' efforts, had not been baptized and were still immersed in pagan rites." (Cardoso:2000:118-9)

The discussion of the *maubere* and the exclusion from the benefits of Portuguese colonialism is very pertinent in considering the needs of Timorese today. The above quote in context refers to a perception of Cardoso whilst living in Lisbon in the late 1970s. During the same timeframe many Timorese travelled to Australia.

The asylum seekers who travelled to Australia were normally excluded from access to higher education. Also excluded from the possibility of position and professional life were the scholarship holders and professional people who may have held qualifications from Portugal, Macau or Mozambique. As Cardoso indicates above, there was also limited access to higher education in Timor prior to the Indonesian invasion. There were two secondary schools (according to Nancy) and the elite students either gained entry to the seminary in Dare, or travelled on scholarship to Portugal or elsewhere. Many Year Ten (Quinto Ano) graduates were directed to Administrative positions in Timor – that was the situation for Cardoso and Xanana Gusmao (Cardoso,2000). This reality may be shifting with the unprecedented involvement of international NGOs and Aid monies since the Independence referendum of 1999. It is too early to make any valid comment on the current changes and educational implementation in Timor Lorosa'e.

### ***Something to being going on with....***

Reflective practice has meant that the researcher is now involved with other projects crossing boundaries from institutional practices to community activity. This journey of educational endeavour has unexpected directions to the research process. The

reconciliation between the Timorese who stayed and those that are returning will be a long-term matter for the new Government of the Independent State of Timor Lorosa'e to engage. The community members in Sydney (and probably in all places) are determined to assist in rebuilding their beloved nation and the pride of its people. How could we do less than to be humbled by their spirit and supportive of their independence.

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