

# Dialogues with Timor-Leste's *gerasaun independensia*: is there room for other histories?

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In Timor-Leste, the life experiences of individuals are intertwined with distinct historical times and social contexts, which include Portuguese colonialism, Japanese occupation, the struggle for independence from a second coloniser nation (Indonesia), a UN administration and, finally, self-government. Similarly to other colonised nations, these 'encounters with modernity'<sup>2</sup> produced a plurality of experiences in ordinary people's lives (Waterson 2007, 3). In the case of Timor-Leste, these were built upon prevailing world views, moral regimes and governing systems of pre-colonial times, known as *kultura* or *lisan*, which are central in East Timorese society.

The youngest generation in Timor-Leste, known as *gerasaun independensia*, is the first of the living generations that did not take part in the resistance against Indonesian occupation.

Conversations about history and (post-)memories of colonialism reveal the perceptions of these young East Timorese, who have diverse cultural origins and educational experiences, of its own history and identity. Strong oral traditions and the scarcity of accounts on the history of the country, written or produced by East Timorese, created the conditions for memory and oral intergenerational transmission of stories being the most common mediums of preserving the knowledge of the past.

This paper presents findings of a study on the East Timorese post-colonial generation's multilayered knowledges of the country's recent history. I argue that this 'intergenerational archive of histories' has been influential in the drive for a 'timorisation' movement of historical production and memorialisation practices. Finally, I look into recent initiatives by East Timorese to write their own history and the possibilities of embracing a plurality of voices in the telling of the country's history(ies).

## Introduction

In this paper I discuss the research undertaken during the year of 2012 in Timor-Leste, which consisted of focus group discussions with three generations of East Timorese, with an emphasis in the younger *gerasaun independensia* (Gonçalves 2016a). Debate among the participants in the groups allowed me to be a participant observer of the discussion between different points of view on the country's history, based on the participants' direct experiences or inherited oral stories, in the case of the younger generation. The meanings and interpretations which the participants conferred to the different historical periods, particular events in their collective history and their everyday life experiences are insightful and valuable in its own right, a methodological trait of oral history which this research adopted (Hamilton and Shopes 2008). The individual narratives shed light on how East Timorese perceive and memorialise the later period of Portuguese colonialism, the Indonesian occupation and the first decade as an independent country. In this respect, Portelli (1997, 161) claims that the memories of historical events and interpretations of the past are treated as objects of study in oral history, including their inherent subjectivity, and thus written accounts are not the only sources of historical knowledge and both should be given equal consideration.

With the purpose of considering and giving visibility to a plurality of knowledges about the past in

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<sup>2</sup> Political modernity is described by Chakrabarty (2000, 4–5) as 'the rule by modern institutions of state, bureaucracy and capitalist enterprise', which involve concepts such as citizenship, the state and civil society, created by a European tradition. In the case of Timor-Leste, the two colonial powers, Portugal and Indonesia, were not exactly examples of political modernity in the sense described above, as they remained autocratic governing systems and, under Portuguese colonialism, citizenship was attributed on the basis of race and assimilation into Portuguese culture.

Timor-Leste, in a context where, historically, East Timorese knowledges have been rendered invisible by colonial powers (Gusmão 2018, 51), in the final part of the paper I look briefly into recent East Timorese historical accounts and oral history projects belonging to a movement for the ‘timorisation’ of historical knowledge production – a concept discussed by the De Lucca (2016, 71–73) and Ma’averu (2018).

### **Generations and Memory**

Individual and collective memories of past events are constructed and moulded by the social and historical context in which they occur (Halbwachs 1980, 51–52). Connerton (1989, 39) further extends the temporal reach of Halbwachs’ notion of ‘collective memory’ by introducing the idea of ‘cultural memory’, the memory that is transmitted between generations. In Jennifer Cole’s (2003, 119) study of East Madagascar, interviewees from the younger generation adapted stories from their family or from adults who they knew as a source of personalized historical memory, which fitted the official historical narrative. Memory, Cole (2006, 238–239) argues, varies between individuals based on their specific experiences and this affects the way memory is transmitted across generations. Furthermore, Hirsch introduces the idea of a post-memory, where issues of memory and the transmission between generations are particularly intense in the experiences of traumatic events (2008, 106–107).

However, Sarlo (2005, 157) problematizes the concept of post-memory, while she considers all memories as reconstructions of the past which ‘produce misleading and fractured narratives or precarious reconstructions that, however, underpin some certainties’ (Sarlo 2005, 157). Post-memory, hence, like the memory which is obtained through direct experience, is mediated by the uses of memory in the present and also by the silences and lacunae that the actors of post-memory seek to fill in. People’s narratives are the result of the interplay between their individual existential concerns, defined by Cole as ‘moral projects’, and the broader social and historical political ideologies in which they are immersed (2003, 122).

The risks of inconsistency and precariousness which are common to all forms of memory, however, don’t render them inadequate for understanding the intergenerational transmission of knowledges of the past. Susana Kaiser, who researched the Argentinean post-conflict generation, establishes a link between ‘post-memories’, which become the knowledge of a violent past, and the degree of political activism in the present (Kaiser 2005, 10–11).

In Timor-Leste, I argue, knowledge and/or experience of past struggles for rights influence contemporary perceptions about those rights. Three distinct generations experienced, as they were coming of age, different governments, educational systems and even different languages. All generations, however, have witnessed during their lives periods of violence, political struggle and reconciliation efforts during independence. I identified in this study three generations<sup>3</sup> of East Timorese based on their socio-historical life experiences, educational and linguistic characteristics (Gonçalves 2012, 20).

The *gerasaun independensia*, who was educated in the period after the country’s achievement of independence (after 1999), is still an understudied generation. Their childhood experiences are marked by the widespread 1999 violence, before and after the popular consultation, and in their youth years they witnessed the 2006 and 2008 internal crisis. It is particularly important to understand that this cohort has been caught in a transitional period of the education system, but also in a context of socio-political crisis and reconfigurations (Gonçalves 2016a, 157–160). Hence, they have had their studies disrupted by conflict and also by an under-resourced educational system in every dimension: in-

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3\_ The older generation (*gerasaun 1975*), who were educated during the Portuguese colonial period; the middle generation (*gerasaun foun*), who grew up as children during Indonesian occupation; the younger generation (*gerasaun independensia*), who were largely educated in the independence period (post-1999) and are now in their thirties and younger.

frastructure, teaching staff, materials and curricula adapted to the reality of a emerging nation opting for two languages which were not on offer in the previous Indonesian school system.

In this study, the younger participants acknowledged that a intergenerational transmission of stories and ideas occurs and that they are receiving these stories and simultaneously combining them with other sources of knowledge. Simultaneously, this younger generation has had the opportunity to live in a time of relative peace and, in some cases, with increased opportunities for education. The strong presence of international organisations in the country and the contact of this younger generation with a diversity of schooling systems, media and cultures, have also shaped this generation's knowledge of the country's history and of global histories (Gonçalves 2016a, 160–164). In spite of this, a combination of scarce history curriculum materials and courses at the various levels of education, has resulted in very little attention given to education on the history of the country. Hence, only in recent years have the East Timorese started to write and reflect on their own history.

One of the factors contributing to this state of affairs is the highly contested nature of the recent history of the country, in particular the 1974/1975 civil war and the resistance movement during Indonesian occupation. Issues of reconciliation and historical justice are still divisive in East Timorese society, leading many educators to believe that this task should be left to outsiders, who would be less biased and able to create a 'middle ground' (Leach 2006, 232–235).

### ***Dialogues with gerasaun independensia***

History in Timor-Leste, as elsewhere, is key to developing nationalist foundational histories and mobilising contemporary political projects. This is often highlighted in politicians speeches, such as the one president Lú-Olo did at the memorial day for the Indonesian invasion on 7 December 1975, when he stated that 'collective memory shall strengthen our unity as a people and a nation'<sup>4</sup> (Lú-Olo 2018).

However, history as an area of study and research is still a work-in-progress in Timor-Leste, where much work still remains to be done in terms of carrying out a systematic collection of oral histories and archival sources, and writing history texts. Existing written historical accounts on the resistance include published biographies of male political leaders, as well as foreign scholars works on the resistance movement in the country and in the diaspora. The *Chega!* report of the Commission of Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR) (2005), based on hundreds of East Timorese testimonies, is the most comprehensive written history of the country and it was undertaken by East Timorese and international researchers (Webster 2007, 582–583). Nevertheless, there are very few publications by East Timorese on the history of the country and even less which are focussed on the role and histories of women (Alves et al. 2003; Guterres 2014) and the younger generation in the resistance movement (Pinto and Jardine 1997; Rei 2007; Saky 2015). On the other hand, some works by foreign scholars have been paving the way to increase the knowledge of women's perspectives on history, their role and life experiences in contemporary history (Conway 2010; Cristalis et al. 2005; Cunha 2012; Hearman 2018; Loney 2018; Niner 2013).

In this context, younger generations have been demonstrating an interest in knowing and understanding their history despite existing difficulties in accessing systematic information, school books and in-depth studies produced in Timor-Leste and from an East Timorese perspective. This reality, echoed by the absence of an History department at the National University (UNTL) and at existing private universities, has been highlighted and debated in public forums (Gonçalves 2016a, 169; Ma'averu 2018).<sup>5</sup>

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4\_ *Memoria kolektiva ne'e mak sei hametin ita nudar povu no nasaun.*

5\_ In response to these types of concerns, the Ministry of Education published Social Sciences school books and developed

Interviews with the younger generation in this research (Gonçalves 2016a, 169) confirm this status quo. This is a testimony of a young activist and Political Science student at the National University (UNTL) who contemplates about his sources of historical knowledge and the difficulties for East Timorese to write their own history,

This [information] is based on the history, this is based on the research we do about history. But *mana*, you know, the East Timorese wanted to do their own research but it is very hard for us to write and publish [our history]. But the good thing is that I can ask friends to share books with me. 'Fidel', 21 years, Dili, 10 August 2012

On the other hand, the national narrative has been focusing on the history of resistance against Indonesian occupation and the first years of independence, while the other historical periods have been relatively under-researched. The history of the time before Portuguese colonialism, *tempu uluk* and *tempu beiala sira*,<sup>6</sup> is increasingly talked about in the country as a group of memories and knowledges which is urgent to preserve and which should not be tied up with an historical narrative that emphasizes a connection with Portuguese perspectives on Timor-Leste's colonisation. On the contrary, 'a timorisation of history' tells of East Timorese views which are more focussed on the pre-colonial political and social dynamics and, during the colonial period, in the nationalist East Timorese perspectives (Ma'averu 2018). In this context, the oral histories and intergenerational transmission of knowledge have a central role, as the testimony of young people in Dili convey (Gonçalves 2016a, 168),

I also heard this from our *katuas* [elders], as they tell us the stories. I only heard this from them; I haven't studied this anywhere yet. 'Mario', 27 years, Dili, 25 August 2012

I will tell the stories according to what we heard from my own grandfather... We feel too young to recount the time when Portuguese governed our land. That is why I interviewed my grandfather and he told me about the Portuguese time but also the *tempu uluk* [the time before the Portuguese presence]. 'Marta', 21 years, Dili, 10 August 2012

Also, members of the *gerasaun foun* narrated their memories of the moment when the country gained independence and the possibilities which they envisioned for their country after the 1999 vote for self-determination,

At that moment I was a young woman. (...) I witnessed the reality that appeared before me from when I was a child until I was 17/18 years old. I saw that there was no justice for young people then. Many of them were killed (...) We attempted to tell the people throughout the country that they should vote for that [CNRT] so that we would gain self-determination and freedom to do whatever we wanted. This represented a great possibility for youth to express themselves in a way they otherwise couldn't have done at that time. *Domingas*, 30 years, Baucau, 22 June 2012

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curricula for the elementary level, including the history of Timor-Leste, which were produced by an East Timorese team in 2016. These materials adapted some of the contents of the *Chega!* report on the history of the conflict with Indonesia with the objective of imparting knowledge not only on the history of the country but also on human rights, reconciliation and peace (Ma'averu 2018).

6\_ Translated from Tetun language, the expressions stand for 'ancient time' and 'time of the ancestors'. Both are used to refer to the historical period before Portuguese colonisation.

Following the achievement of independence, the testimony of young people highlight the lack of space to express their views and ways of belonging to a national identity, which is almost exclusively associated with the participation in the heroic resistance to colonialism (Gonçalves 2016b, 487–497).

### **Room for other histories**

As Mozambican academic Maria Paula Meneses highlights, it is important to consider the different types of knowledge about the histories of colonial relationships, produced both by colonised peoples and those in the colonial centres (2012, 121–123). The latter are reflected in a dominant Eurocentric narrative produced in the case of Mozambique, and also of Timor-Leste. According to Meneses (*ibid.*, 122), the history of Africa has been compounded by the devaluing and forgetting of the memories of the colonised peoples, which constitutes in itself an act of colonisation. According to her,

[T]his question is particularly important in Mozambique, where many people frequently affirm, vis-à-vis the ‘official history’ or the ‘universal history’, that ‘what we remember is not history. History is what is written in the books. We, Mozambicans, we have traditions, other histories...’ (*ibid.*)

These concerns are echoed in the process of determining what is valid historical knowledge in Timor-Leste. If in the initial years of Timor-Leste’s independence, the historical research and oral history projects and archives/museums were mostly undertaken by foreign academics and/or with significant external support, in the last years there has been a movement, which gaining momentum, for the ‘timorisation’ of historical production and memorialisation practices.

Since 2014, several oral history research and writing initiatives by East Timorese have been taking place: the Comité Orientador 25 (CO25) history project on youth in the resistance; the oral research project carried out by the Commission of Research and History of the Timor Women team (CPEHMT); the publishing of an anthology of Nicolau dos Reis Lobato’s speeches (Gusmão 2018) and a brief historical contextual analysis, which was supported by Centro Nacional Chega! and Fundação Dato Siri Loe II.

CO25 is a group of former youth resistance members who set out to undertake a broad research into the history of the youth involvement in the national liberation struggle, with the ultimate goal of writing a book on the history of resistance and other publications. In their internet site they state their mission: ‘Highlight the importance of documenting and writing the history of Timor-Leste, in particular on the national liberation struggle, so that it may function as a political and philosophical drive for the future generations’ (CO25, 2019).

On the other hand, the research by CPEHMT stands out as a project which can bring more plurality to the production of Timor-Leste’s history, in a way that includes an important part of East Timorese people, the women, as protagonists and also as participants in the research. Women have been notoriously absent from official and scholarly historical accounts, as we discussed earlier in this article. CPEHMT is composed by a collective of local researchers and by the Popular Organisation of the Timorese Women (OPMT)<sup>7</sup>, with the objective of ‘documenting the experience of women who lived through the Indonesian occupation, and resulted in interviewing nearly 800 people’ (Ma’averu 2018). In the opening panel<sup>8</sup> of the AMRT exhibition that they did in 2015 one could read: ‘OPMT wants to create a space so that the protagonists who are still alive have the chance to tell their history and thus

7\_ Created as part of the FRETILIN party in 1975, it was first organisation to work for the emancipation of East Timorese women and its first leader was Rosa Muki Bonaparte.

8\_ The results were presented in 10 panels at the Archives-Museum of the Timorese Resistance (AMRT) in 2015 and a book with the final results will be published in 2019.

complete the historical facts through this research. Also, so that each person may, individually or collectively, recount their history in the national liberation struggle (...) history is not only about past events but it is also about its relevance in life today and in the future'.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, the book edited by the East Timorese academic Father Martinho Gusmão on Nicolau dos Reis Lobato<sup>10</sup> exhorts the younger readers to know in more depth the history of the independence struggle of the country, in the words of Hugo Fernandes, CNC's director (Gusmão 2018, 21). The editor, Gusmão (ibid., 51–55), highlights the idea of *descolonização da interioridade* (translated by him from the concept of 'decolonisation of the mind'), citing the Maori scholar Tuhiwai Smith (2012). He connects this with earlier efforts in 1975 by the East Timorese elites to affirm rights to hold knowledges and moral regimes which are distinct from the colonisers and to 'revolt against the exclusivity of the access to reason of the white colonisers' (ibid., 54).

### **Conclusion**

This paper attempted to provide insights into how the *gerasaun independensia* articulates their memories of the country's history, as well as the memories transmitted to them by the older generations on the country's long history of struggle for independence. Memory and interpretations of the past allow us to understand how different people in Timor-Leste view their experiences and perceptions of living through colonialism and transition to independence and how they insert themselves into the collective history of the country.

As East Timorese academic Martinho Gusmão asserts, early nationalists like Nicolau Lobato were fighting for a decolonisation process in all its dimensions, including the 'decolonisation of the mind' and the liberation of East Timorese people from all types of colonial subjugation (2018, 58–59). The springing up of East Timorese initiatives with the objective of registering the history of the country (in writing and audio-visual materials) reveals the society's pressing need to know, register, keep and present histories on the struggle for independence from Portuguese and Indonesian colonialism, as well as the ways of life during pre-colonial times, though the emphasis has been on the first. Simultaneously, there is a drive to affirm a national identity based on different narratives to Portuguese, Indonesian and foreign scholars accounts of the history of the country.

In contemporary Timor-Leste, this influential 'intergenerational archive of histories' is used to articulate collective and individual ways of belonging to the nation, but also to claim rights. It needs, therefore, to represent and be open to all East Timorese, by making room for other histories.

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9\_ Translation from the author.

10\_ First commander of the FALINTIL, Prime-Minister sworn in during the unilateral proclamation of the country's independence in 1975, leader of FRETILIN from 1977 until 1978, he died in combat against Indonesian forces in 1978.

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