

BOOK REVIEW:

Rebuilding the Education Sector in East Timor During UNTAET: International Collaboration and Timorese Agency

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BOOK REVIEW: Trina Supit. (2020). *Rebuilding the Education Sector in East Timor During UNTAET: International Collaboration and Timorese Agency*. Routledge. ISBN 9780367345617. pp. 280.

The United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), spanned October 1999 until the re-establishment of independence¹ on 2 May 2002. It was preceded by UNAMET,² succeeded by UNMISSET, protected by INTERFET and later UNTAET PFK; this period was a time of transition from (Indonesian) occupation to (Timorese) independence under the watchful eye of the United Nations (UN). Amid this alphabet soup of acronyms, Trina Supit arrived in early 2000 to work at the coalface within the UN's education division, the section tasked with establishing a local school system in place of the destruction that had been wrought by the departing Indonesian army. As she says in her introduction, the book is her attempt at making sense of what she was a part of:

I determined to discover the background to the policies being implemented and the politics being played out in the field, of which I was mostly unaware, being so preoccupied with my work in the education division [of UNTAET]. (p. xix)

In determining the background policies and politics, Supit has gathered a sizeable number of reports, documents and research in Portuguese, Indonesian and English from not only these three-and-a-half years of UNTAET but going back to the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th century. Analysis of these documents formed the basis of her PhD and now this 'sourcebook' of education in Timor-Leste. Chapter 1 presents a background to the arrival of the Portuguese and other Europeans in the region, the territorial skirmishes and the eventual settling of a Portuguese administration, taking us up to their withdrawal in 1975 after the major changes brought on by the Carnation Revolution in Portugal in 1974. While this chapter provides little insight into the pre-colonial Timor-Leste, it explores the

¹ The original independence was short-lived, declared on 28 November 1975, with Indonesian troops invading nine days later on 7 December 1975.

² UNAMET (United Nations Mission in East Timor) 1 June to 31 August 1999; UNMISSET (United Nations Mission of Support to East Timor) 20 May 2002 to 20 May 2005; INTERFET (International Force East Timor) 20 September 1999 to 28 February 2000; UNTAET PFK (UNTAET Peace-Keeping Force) March 2000 to May 2002.

legacy of Portuguese colonisation, including language, religion and what Supit calls ‘an enduring relationship’ (p. 24). In looking at ‘agency’ in the book’s subtitle, this chapter touches on Timorese resistance to aspects of the colonial rule while also explaining the *assimilados*, those Timorese who assimilated into Portuguese cultural, religious and language norms and the other elites who strongly influenced education policy in UNTAET times.

Chapter 2, ‘Colonial policies in education’, then outlines the educational policies enacted by the Portuguese colonial administration and covers the Indonesian government’s policies (not technically colonial but a predecessor to UNTAET). Happily, Supit dispels some myths of schooling in Portuguese times, such as that only 47,000 children attended school in 1975, much-quoted from the erroneous 2000 UN report *Building blocks for a nation* that has been recycled in many English-medium publications (e.g., Nicolai, 2004; Beck, 2021). Instead, Supit has accessed the Portuguese documents that indicate more than 94,000 children attended primary school in 1974 in a period of growing enrolments; this number was used in several contemporaneous publications in addition to those that Supit uses (e.g., Grupo Coordenador para a Reformulação do Ensino em Timor, 1975; Thomasz, 1975/2002). Indeed, this chapter might be read in conjunction with other Portuguese documents, such as the *Boletim Oficial do Governo da Colonia de Timor* held in the Australian National Library, going back to 1916, that include the educational policies of the government in Timor-Leste in the 20th century. For example, this entry from 1927 makes accommodation for local needs:

[S]obretudo nas escolas do interior, modificar êste programa de modo a torná-lo mais fácil, prático e aplicável as circunstâncias locais e necessidades dos povos timorenses [especially in rural schools, modify this program in order to make it easier, more practical and applicable to local circumstances and the needs of the Timorese people] (Governo da Colonia de Timor, 1927, p. 6)

Interestingly, these sentiments are echoed in one of the core principles of current primary school curriculum documents: ‘*Ligasaun ba kultura no maneira moris lokál nian* [Connection to culture and way of local life]’ (Ministério da Educação, 2014, p. 18). Thus, Chapter 2 provides good historical documentation from Portuguese and Indonesian times that serve as the basis for more current educational characteristics in Timor-Leste.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 then take the reader on a detailed recount of the ins and outs of the actors—international and national—as the UN sought to rebuild an education system, for the uniquely Timorese context. Certainly, many of us who haunted education in these early days will both smile and cringe at the mention of the names of people who intervened in the myriad decisions to be made, the convoluted processes for getting tasks done and the sense of both desperation and opportunity to create something new and worthwhile for Timorese children and communities and, ultimately, the nation. Education continues to be an issue high on the list of social concerns in the nation, and teachers still frame their work in terms of nation-building:

[E]ducation is important to the nation of Timor-Leste . . . if we don’t have education, the nation will fall. (Year 1 teacher, Timor-Leste, in Quinn & Buchanan, 2021)

Supit has marshalled a large collection of documents and memories—having been in the thick of it—to give the reader a ringside view of how education ended up the way it is now, 20 years later.

The final chapter that promises to deal with the legacy of this instrumental period of educational history in the country tries to give a current state-of-the-system, but this is always tricky when governments and their policies change quickly and new donor projects change the landscape. The vagrancy of publication schedules will date the ‘current’ situation. So there are already several gaps: more current figures for achievement, reports on the impact of the primary school leadership program, and current curriculum development programs – many of which are summarised in the government’s most recent *Education Sector Plan 2020–2024* (World Bank, 2022).

One gap that should be considered in reading this book is the under-representation of the considerable research published in Portuguese. In education, over 70% of all publications in the last 20 years have been written in Portuguese, many about language, pedagogy and curriculum (Quinn, in press). As acknowledged, Supit has provided many reports and documents across the various official and working languages of Timor-Leste, but it would be important for a reader interested in the history of the nation’s systems to supplement the picture with the research of others working in this key language of Timor-Leste. In the same vein, it would have been good to remind the reader that this is a multilingual nation, influenced by Portuguese, Indonesian, English and Tetum, and to see those languages representing Timor-Leste. I am certain that much of the rich material of quotes and documentation was rendered in a language other than English. The reader should keep in mind the diverse linguistic nature of Timor-Leste in reading this rich collection of documents and history of an education system that Trina Supit has put together.

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