

Archives in Timor-Leste
Impressions from a visit to East Timor, May 2003

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Summary

Twenty five years of Indonesian military occupation, culminating in the 1999 torching and destruction of the country's infrastructure, left East Timor with few documentary records of its history and more immediate past. The huge gaps in the East Timorese record of its recent past can be partly filled by documentary material held in private hands and public institutions in Australia and elsewhere – material accumulated by those who worked on and observed the unfolding tragedy of East Timor from 1975.

I visited East Timor to learn what plans exist in East Timor to re-build physical repositories of history and memory and to see whether East Timor was ready to receive materials from potential overseas donors. There were a surprising number of archival projects in progress or in planning. At the time of the visit, however, none of the projects appeared to be sufficiently established to receive and preserve original, unique materials – though this may change in a relatively short time.

There are significant limitations to the report: I had limited time in East Timor and, more importantly, I have not attempted to make judgements on the political, security, economic and legal contexts in which archives must exist and be sustained.

Note on Updates

Any report on developments in East Timor, including that on archives, can be quickly outdated. That, combined with the delay in publishing this report, means some aspects of the report may already need updating.

Archival developments in East Timor will be monitored and updated on the CHART website at www.timorarchives.info/archet.html

The author will be grateful for any feedback and/or further information on archive developments and projects in East Timor. (Email: chart@timorarchives.info)

Author note

John Waddingham was co-founder and coordinator of Timor Information Service in Melbourne, 1975-1984. He is now a qualified archivist working in small archives in Western Australia. He is coordinating the Clearing House for Archival Records on Timor (CHART) project.

Introduction

East Timor is the world's newest independent country. Passing from Portuguese colonial backwater through twenty five years of catastrophic Indonesian military occupation, East Timor was internationally recognised as a separate state on 28 May 2002.

The horrendous toll of this path to independence in lost or ruined lives is well known, as is the wholesale destruction of most of the physical infrastructure of the country in 1999. Less often discussed, however, is the loss or destruction of East Timor's records of its history and culture.

The initial Indonesian invasion in December 1975 saw the stripping of Dili of items of value and the reported removal to Jakarta of documentary materials. Whatever Indonesian administrative records existed in East Timor towards the end of the 24-year occupation, most of them were lost in the final destructive acts of looting and burning in the aftermath of the 1999 independence referendum. While historic and current records of the Catholic Church remained outside Indonesian control during the occupation, many Church records were also lost in the torching of the Bishop's residence and other church property in 1999. The museum collection was plundered, libraries were destroyed.

But not all was lost. While many records of the Resistance were captured during the course of the occupation, some remained safe in East Timorese hands. Fragments of historic and recent administrative records survived as they lay neglected in the attic of a surviving major administration building. The metropolitan Portuguese archives still hold significant records of colonial times which might be copied or repatriated to East Timor. Some important administrative records – especially relating to land ownership for example – are still held by Jakarta. While unsuccessful to date, negotiations to retrieve relevant Indonesian materials are still possible.

Outside of official records, there remain two major repositories of East Timor's record of the Indonesian occupation in particular. The first is in the memories of the participants and survivors with their stories of resistance, life and death inside East Timor over twenty five years. The second is in the vast array of documentary materials, organisational and personal reports, photographs, letters, newsclippings, audio and visual footage sent from, or created outside, East Timor during this period. Such materials are in the hands of the East Timorese diaspora (including external members of the nationalist political groups), international non-government and media organisations, individual and organisational observers and activists.

The memories of East Timorese will need to be recorded while survivors still live. Future East Timorese archivists will want to know exactly what materials are held overseas so that they can identify what is needed to build and complement collections being re-built in Timor. In both cases, there will need to be formal physical repositories in East Timor to initiate and sustain the creation or receipt, and then long-term preservation, of these materials of memory. This report examines the beginning of such archive developments inside independent East Timor.

Origins of this report

The CHART Project (Clearing House for Archival Records on Timor) is an Australian project to identify and promote the preservation of East Timor materials still in private hands in Australia. To achieve long-term preservation, private owners of materials are

encouraged to lodge their collections with established repositories in Australia or hold for eventual deposit in East Timorese institutions.

Key questions facing people wanting to lodge materials in East Timor are:

- What archival institutions exist in Timor and/or what is planned?
- Are any of these institutions in Timor ready and/or suitable to receive materials for long-term preservation and access?
- What is the economic, political, legal and security environment in East Timor - inasmuch as it might affect the sustainability of archival projects there?

I visited East Timor for the first time from May 16-27, 2003 to get some general impressions of the new country and, specifically, to survey current archive developments there.

Limitations

This report should be read with an eye to its obvious limitations.

The first limitation was time. My nine days in East Timor included two weekends and the 'day of international recognition of independence' anniversary (May 20) public holiday – leaving only four working days to contact and meet key personalities with archival interests. I had valuable meetings with key archival proponents and others, but time did not permit several other possible meetings with particular senior bureaucrats and politicians. Next time!

The most significant omission from this report, however, is any detail and judgement on the broader political, security, social, economic, legal and institutional environments in newly independent East Timor – matters which will directly impact on the development and viability of archives there. A few personal observations follow.

Several journeys into the countryside surprised me with images of extensive food production, smiling faces and zillions of active, curious, inventive children. These images must be balanced with empirical reports of extended drought and significant food shortages in other areas. Food supplies, land disputes, agricultural development, education and basic health services in rural Timor where 80 per cent of the population lives are just a fragment of the multitude of issues which need addressing and will likely take priority over cultural institutional development.

It is still very early days in independent East Timor's political system – in terms of party and parliamentary politics and the relationships between government and non-government organisations. Pervasive rumours and scuttlebutt amongst the political elite about personalities and politics and the apparent over-sensitivity of some government figures to criticism might be worrying, but are not unique to Timor.

The rule of law and the relative powers of the legal and parliamentary systems are still being forged. Some examples: Recent uncertainties on the application of Indonesian or Portuguese law in Timor appear to have been resolved by the parliament. On the other hand, the parliament has re-endorsed legislation on immigration and asylum matters which had earlier been rejected by the President following an opinion by East Timor's fledgling court system that sections of the new law were unconstitutional. How these issues eventually play

out will be good indicators of the direction of East Timor's political system and the strength of the rule of law in that system.

It must be remembered that East Timor is re-constructing itself from zero in almost all ways. It has been an independent country for only a little over one year. With few exceptions, the awful climate of fear and violent resolution of conflict which characterised East Timor during the occupation has faded. This in itself is a great achievement.

Institutions at all levels of government and society are being established but their form and stability are not yet settled. That, combined with East Timor's continuing dependence on external funds and expertise and the great unknowns in short and medium term developments inside neighbouring Indonesia in particular, make it simply too early to be certain of the directions East Timor can or will take. For this reason, the following exploration of archival developments does not address the key issue of the broader context of their creation and sustainability.

Archives in East Timor

There were a surprising number of separate archival projects either underway or in planning at the time of my visit. While only two of the projects were 'on the road', most have a definite eye on historical material accumulated in other countries and anticipate seeking them for eventual long-term housing in East Timor.

There were indications of only limited or fragmentary communication between various proponents on their respective plans. For this reason, there may well be other plans or projects which I did not learn of in May.

What follows is the sum of what I *was* able to learn about existing projects.

National Archive

Considerable work and resources have gone into the creation of a national archival entity for East Timor. Given the vast range of pressing challenges before the new government, this may at first seem surprising. There is, however, still a long way to go before a fully functioning archive exists.

Origins

The *Arquivo Nacional* has its origins in the work of the United Nations Transitional Authority in East Timor (UNTAET). Under UN specialist guidance, a 'records and archives workplan' was established in March 2000. The plan included promotion of formal record-keeping systems in government departments and the establishment of a 'national records centre' and a 'national archive'.

The records centre was to store non-active government records – some of which would eventually be selected for transfer to the national archive for permanent retention. In addition to these records, the national archive was to hold records from the Portuguese and Indonesian administration eras (comprising surviving remnants discovered in Timor and materials to be sought from Portugal and Indonesia).

The early planning document envisaged the National Archive to hold "the institutional memory of the state" and to be a "research institution in which citizens are entitled to walk in freely to carry out research on their country's administrative history".

A wrecked building at Hera, 10 km outside Dili, was identified for rehabilitation to house the records and archives centre. Required legislation and regulations to 'ensure protection of the government's institutional memory...(and) ...give East Timorese the right of access' were mooted to be in place by March 2001.

While building work and legislative frameworks did not progress before formal independence (20 May 2002), a number of Timorese received archival training in Portugal, Malaysia and Darwin. Using donated archival storage materials from National Archives of Australia, work commenced to salvage the significant volume of Portuguese and Indonesian era materials discovered in poor condition in the attics of a surviving main government building in 1999.

Present Situation

The current director of the national archive is Pedro Fernandes, an East Timorese who originally trained as an architect. He manages a number of staff in seemingly well-equipped government offices. The archive is able to draw on the knowledge and experience of a 'volunteer consultant' in the person of Jose Mattoso, medieval scholar and retired head of the Portuguese National Archive (and currently a member of the Portuguese Mission to East Timor). The archives fall under the administrative responsibility of Ana Pessoa, Minister for State Administration.

The UNTAET-proposed reconstruction of the Hera building did not proceed. Further investigation revealed chronic rising damp in the building (absolutely inimical to archival storage), so plans to use the site have been abandoned. As of late May 2003, no suitable alternate building had been selected for refurbishment; no land had been identified for siting a new facility.

Formal mandate and legislative framework documents drafted by UNTAET were reportedly rejected by the responsible minister as 'not suitable for conditions' in East Timor. A new draft has been developed but is 'not yet ready' for submission to the Government and not available for public scrutiny. It is unclear when this will be completed. Guesses as to when it might be considered by parliament for final ratification suggest anything up to twelve months from now.

The archive has responsibility for keeping records from the pre-independence United Nations administration. It also holds a selection of items from the collection of Jill Jolliffe which she donated for exhibition during independence celebrations in 2002.

Work continues on the remnant Portuguese and Indonesian administration records but this is greatly hampered by inadequate archival storage space. While it is understood that these records are 'secure', information on the whereabouts of the material is not made public. Much of the material is still in a poor state; most remains unsorted. Intellectual work is being done on the originators of the material (five Indonesian- and 62 Portuguese-appointed Governors) to assist in the arrangement of the materials. A completed sorting and listing of the material is reportedly expected to take 5-10 years.

A request to generally view the materials and storage conditions was denied on the grounds that direct Ministerial approval is currently required for any access to the collection.

Material from overseas

The National Archive does envisage seeking materials from overseas to fill out its collection. Described as 'repatriation', archives head Pedro Fernandes expects the archive to seek relevant records from Portuguese and Indonesian government sources. Less clear was whether they would also be seeking records of East Timor's recent history and memory which might be held privately in other countries such as Australia. He did make the point, however, that the continuing lack of a suitable repository makes it impossible to consider any immediate transfers of material to the National Archive in Timor.

Comarca / Balide Centre for Reconciliation and Human Rights

Comarca, the former Portuguese and Indonesian prison in the Balide area of Dili, is the focus of plans to create a human rights memorial museum and historical repository. A centrepiece of the proposed archival collection will be materials accumulated through the work of East Timor's Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR).

Origins

A proposal to rehabilitate Comarca prison was first made in 2000 by East Timor's Association of Ex-Political Prisoners (ASSEPOL) which had been given control of the site. This idea was picked up by the newly established CAVR which, in the absence of suitable office space in much-trashed Dili, was seeking a suitable building to rehabilitate. A memorandum of understanding between ASSEPOL and CAVR was signed in April 2002 giving CAVR use of the building for the duration of its mandate (late 2004) and determining the long term use of the building as a memorial to repression and 'a centre for the promotion of human rights and reconciliation in East Timor'.

CAVR took responsibility for the site, funded rebuilding from a Japanese government grant and moved into the rehabilitated building in February 2003. As an independent statutory authority, CAVR's work is to establish facts about human rights violations (April 1974-October 1999), to assist reintegration of less serious offenders into their communities through formal reconciliation procedures and to report to East Timor's President its findings and recommendations on the future protection of human rights in the country.

The Commission has a staff of some 200 East Timorese and a number of international advisors, assistants and researchers.

Present Situation

The day-to-day work of CAVR continues apace and is generating a growing collection of original and other human rights documentary material. As at May 2003, some 3,000 individual statements (mainly from victims) on specific human rights violations had been recorded. The Commission had received over 500 applications from perpetrators for reconciliation hearings; public hearings had been held on violations including the experiences of political prisoners and women.

Added to the records of this work will be the outcome of research teams studying key issues of the period including forced displacement and famine, death toll, political conflict (including the 1975 civil war), massacres, international 'actors' and children & conflict.

CAVR is acquiring copies of related materials in public and private hands in Australia and elsewhere.

Before it concludes its work, CAVR is required by law to organise its archives and records 'for possible future reference'. Implementation of a formal archive plan will be central to meeting this legal obligation.

While archival infrastructure is not yet in place, its implementation is in motion. Initial budgetary requirements for the archives have been established and international funding for special equipment, shelving and storage materials has been granted. Australian Volunteers International (AVI) was commissioned to find a suitable experienced archivist for a two-year contract to 'advise on and help implement the design, development and management of a professional, but appropriate, archiving system'. An Australian archivist, Del Cuddihy, has been selected to fill this position and is expected in Dili in late October. A large space (with strengthened concrete flooring to accommodate shelving) has been assigned for the archive. The Comarca building already has a well-developed office infrastructure – a precious resource in today's Dili.

Material from overseas

As already noted, CAVR has been collecting copies of overseas material related to its ongoing research work (the CHART project has assisted CAVR in the identification of some materials held privately or in Australian repositories). In addition, CAVR and ASSEPOL are now jointly and actively soliciting donations of material from individuals and organisations inside and outside East Timor. They are seeking original or copied materials from any source in any medium which relates to East Timor 1974-1999.

Max Stahl project

Max Stahl's historic video of the 1991 Dili massacre is often credited with contributing to a change in international opinion on Indonesia's occupation. This footage and subsequent work by Stahl has been identified by many Timor archival proponents as a key record of recent Timor history needed for preservation and access in Timor.

This is to be realised through a special project entitled "Max Stahl's Award-Winning Video Archive—Safeguarding A Nation's Record of Truth, Identity, and Memory".

The project is being coordinated by the culture unit of UNESCO's Jakarta office. With funding from Germany and Finland, the project aims to make publicly accessible selected transcribed and translated Stahl video material. Max Stahl will participate in the project which will also train Timorese nationals in the various procedures.

The project was scheduled to start in September but at the time of writing, a site for the project has yet to be decided. It is unclear at this stage whether the project may also form the nucleus of (or stimulus for) an entity to manage the demanding issue of long term archival storage of audio-visual materials in Timor's challenging climatic conditions..

Falintil / Resistance records project

Passing references were made by several people to ongoing work to preserve surviving records of the armed resistance created during the occupation. Because of apparent political sensitivities, details of this project are not yet in the public domain – but it is reassuring to know such a project is in progress. It was not clear whether this project was part of the National Archive processes. Future storage and access conditions for this important collection are not known.

Presidential Library

President Xanana Gusmao has often publicly expressed his belief in the importance of preserving the historical record. With a desire to develop an ‘open presidency’, Xanana intends to add a public library-cum-resource centre to his presidential offices. The library will reportedly focus on ‘reconciliation’ materials – books, multi-media and archival materials – accessible to ordinary Timorese and visiting dignitaries alike. Particular efforts will be given to enable access by Timorese with low literacy skills.

A commitment for future funding of a librarian has been received from Sweden. Formal building plans have been drawn up but funding had, as of May, not been secured and there was no information professional directing initial planning. It remains unclear which archival records are envisaged to be available through this centre.

***Uma Fukun* / National Human Rights Centre**

A Portuguese colonial building opposite the harbour in central Dili, known as *Uma Fukun*, has been restored with UNESCO and World Bank money to house the East Timor Cultural Centre. This centre is the focus of plans ‘to conserve and display the material and cultural heritage of the people of East Timor’ and programs to promote cultural and artistic expression. One function proposed for the Centre is a ‘National Human Rights Centre’ which will house a resource centre for documentation on human rights issues including historical Timor materials. The current status of this July 2002 proposal is not known.

More detailed information on the development of the East Timor Cultural Centre and its programs can be found at: <http://etcc.anu.edu.au/about.html>

Independence Memorial Hall

A gift of the government of South Korea, this building is mooted to serve as a museum and ‘data centre’ focussing on the struggle for independence. Its prospective functions include permanent displays on objects and the history of independence, cultural performances, conference and seminar venue. At the time of writing, decisions on these functions were still being considered – including consideration of the expected functions of the *Uma Fukun* building (see above).

‘Repatriation’ of archival materials to Timor?

A key question underlying this survey of archive developments in East Timor was: Are any archival projects in East Timor ready to receive collections of original historical materials from overseas for long term preservation and access?

The answer to this question in May 2003 was ‘Not yet’.

Only two archival developments (National Archive & Comarca / CAVR) seemed sufficiently advanced for this to be even considered. The others, for the moment, were either too specific (Stahl), too private (Falintil/Resistance) or were simply not yet developed enough to draw concrete conclusions.

National Archive

As has been seen, the director of the archive wisely regards receipt of overseas materials impossible until a suitable repository has been established. The focus of the National Archive is likely to be the administrative records of government; it is unclear whether it will collect broader historical material. These uncertainties, combined with current high level restrictions on access and the absence of a legislative framework for its operation, render the National Archive, for the immediate future, an unlikely repository for materials held privately in Australia.

Comarca / Balide

The CAVR-ASSEPOL plan for a human rights centre and archive at Comarca has the potential to set standards and precedents for the development of a community-based, accessible repository of East Timorese memory and history.

While it does not yet have archival storage infrastructure in place nor the basic formal receipt and accessioning procedures that might be expected of an archival institution, these can be expected to be established in the near future by the incoming archivist. It is still too early to say what strategies will be employed in the Comarca building to meet reasonable requirements for long-term archival storage conditions in Timor’s ‘dry tropical’ climate.

Of some concern is the question of what happens to the collection when CAVR’s mandate and work ceases in October 2004. CAVR and ASSEPOL are committed to a path of developing a long-term non-government archival repository based initially around the CAVR collection. However, given that CAVR is a statutory authority controlled by government legislation, it would seem necessary to ensure there is formal government assent to this CAVR-ASSEPOL plan for the CAVR materials.

Potential collection donors will want to know more about the progress and prospective viability of the CAVR-ASSEPOL plan before consigning originals of unique or rare materials to Timor. There are however, very strong reasons for sending copies of such material to CAVR now.

As already noted, CAVR is currently soliciting material from outside Timor. It has already received and has further offers of copies of significant material currently held overseas – mostly related directly to its current research and the documentary evidence required to underpin its human rights hearings and investigations.

Australian holders of materials can assist the immediate work of CAVR by submitting a listing of any primary-source and other material they hold which might be added to its documentary collection on human rights matters. Such lists in CAVR hands will allow it to identify materials it needs for its work and will also inform archival developers in East Timor of the volume and type of material which might be available to them in the future.

General comments

The apparent multiplicity of projects or plans for developing archives in East Timor is at once both encouraging and bewildering. Encouraging because it indicates that archives are seen as an important issue in the reconstruction of East Timor. Bewildering because there did not appear to have been much dialogue between the various proponents - with the prospective result of a range of competing institutions arising.

Theoretically, there are advantages in there being more than one central repository for Timor's archival records. Given its own violent and destructive immediate past, East Timor knows well the price of a single burnt building. On the other hand, there are pressing demands across East Timor for a broad range of more basic infrastructural developments. In the particular circumstances in East Timor, a multiplicity of uncoordinated expenditures on separate archival developments is at least questionable and probably unwise.

It is too early to point to definite archive outcomes so early in the reconstruction of East Timor. This is especially so outside the sphere of the official government or 'national archive'. If all archival proponents insist on implementing their particular plans, it is to be hoped that they can at least coordinate their ideas and complement each other.

All will need professional archival advice to develop physical infrastructure, archival processes and systems and local expertise. This advice would be best met by the sustained (or regular periodic) presence in Timor of experienced archivists – especially those with expertise in climatic and 'third world' conditions comparable to East Timor. Perhaps this is something the various proponents could jointly coordinate and share.

One striking aspect of all of these prospective plans (with the exception of the government archive in relation to administrative records), is there does not yet appear to be any institution committed to collecting output from today's East Timor. Today's newspapers, books, images, leaflets, radio broadcasts and so forth are tomorrow's archival record of East Timorese civil society in its early life as an independent nation. There is a clear need for a new or existing institution in Timor to ensure such records are gathered and kept for future generations.

[End]

Acknowledgements

I owe a special thanks to Pat Walsh & Annie Keogh for accommodating me, arranging meetings, transport around Dili and introducing me to the East Timorese countryside on some memorable sojourns to Balibo, Aileu and Venilale.

Many thanks to those who spared the time to discuss archival issues in Timor. They are listed in the Appendix. While I have sought to reflect accurately their conversations with me, all errors of fact, impressions or interpretation are my responsibility alone. Thanks also to Inge Lempe from CAVR for her superb interpreting skills in two important conversations.

The visit to East Timor was partly funded from a 1999 grant by Neil Barrett for East Timor archival initiatives.

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Appendix: People consulted

Jacinto Alves, National Commissioner, CAVR

Linda Bell, Northern Territory Archives Service, Darwin

Joao Carrascalao, President, Timorese Democratic Union (UDT)

Rumiana Decheva, UNESCO associate

Pedro Fernandes, head of the *Arquivo Nacional*

Mary Gissing, conservator, National Museum & Cultural Centre

Jill Jolliffe, journalist & author

Jose Mattoso, member of Portuguese Mission in Timor

Palmira Pires, East Timor Development Agency

Liesl Rich, advisor, Office of the President

Kevin Sherlock, collector & bibliographer, Darwin

Pat Walsh, special advisor, CAVR

Nicole Wiseman, co-manager, Xanana Reading Room