

# What is the Place of *Mar de Timor* in Timorese Geopolitics, Culture and Education?

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**Abstract:** Timor-Leste is one of the youngest States of the twenty-first century. It was a Portuguese colony, occupied by Indonesia, the stage of United Nations interventions, and since its restoration of independence, it has been undergoing the process of state- and nation-building. The sea is important for Timor-Leste in several dimensions. The question of the maritime borders of Timor-Leste and the interest in natural gas and oil have been the target of disputes in the region. The strategic dimension of the sea combines traditional cultural values and practices with the policies of a modern state, defining both its international relations and Timor-Leste's national identity. Education plays a fundamental role in the construction of collective understandings on the subject, since schools serve as important communication channels of ideas and state values. Thus, the aim of this paper is to understand the place of the *Mar de Timor* in Timor-Leste's geopolitics, culture and education. The study is framed by documents relating to maritime border treaties, as well as the analysis of the Timorese curriculum of general secondary education currently in force. This methodological option is based on the recognition that the curriculum is in itself a product of international co-operation in the process of state-building.

**Keywords:** Timor-Leste; Mar de Timor; Timorese geopolitics; Timorese culture; state-building.

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## Introduction

The current article describes the output of an original qualitative study aiming to understand the place of *Mar de Timor* in Timor-Leste's state- and nation-building process. Timor-Leste is one of the youngest State of the twenty-first century, having obtained its independence in 2002. The foreign influence in the country harks back to the past, but also in the present.

One example is the discussion on the maritime borders of Timor-Leste, namely considering the interest in natural gas and oil, which have been the target of disputes in the region, mainly between Timor-Leste and Australia. If on one hand, *Mar de Timor* involves regional and international dimensions, on the other hand it has local importance, occupying a prominent place in the social imagination, in Timorese cosmology, and in the very way the State and the population think about its geopolitics.

This paper is sustained in documental analysis, and aims to characterise the role of *Mar de Timor* in Timor-Leste's state- and nation-building. In addition to political documents such as *Tratado do Mar*, the authors focused on the analysis of documents from the Timorese secondary education system. Education plays a fundamental role in the process of constructing collective understandings on the specific subject. Therefore, it is methodologically assumed that these educational documents constitute important communication channels of ideas and state values (Fernandes 2020).

The study aimed to answer to the following research question: *What is the place of Mar de Timor in Timorese geopolitics, culture and education?* Therefore, the present paper is structured in three sections with both a theoretical and empirical nature, namely: (i) the process of national construction: in between *Kultura* and the state; (ii) the geopolitics and the Sea Treaty; and (iii) educational and cultural dimensions of the sea in Timor.

The paper finishes with closing remarks, in which overall conclusions considering the research question are highlighted, and main limitations and suggestions for further investigation are also included.

## Processes of nation-building: between *Kultura*<sup>1</sup> and State

Timor-Leste achieved its independence in 2002, being one of the newest states of the 21st century. The foreign presence is a constant and has been configured over time under multiple faces, such as colonialism, invasion, intervention and collaboration. The colonial facet is related to over 400 years as a Portuguese colony (1512-1975). The invasion period is related to the violent Indonesian occupation for 24 years (1975-1999). Intervention refers to the tutelage of the United Nations (1999-2012), and facet of collaboration is the international co-operation underway since its restored independence in 2002. Since then, the Timorese challenge has revolved around how the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (RDTL) conducts its state-building and nation-building processes towards self-determination.

The new organisation of the State became a priority as public policy, since it had to be conceived from nothing. According to Rui Feijó (2010: 157-158), it is about Timor-Leste being able 'to be weaved into the political and cultural fabric' in order to 'express their voice [...] requiring active participation in the process of internalizing new institutions, ideas, instruments and absorbing them into their cultural patterns.' This issue is crucial for the country, since, after the restoration of independence, it became a privileged stage for applying development models, or what Nuno Mendes (2010: 173) points out as an interesting case and an example in the field of International Relations 'of the oscillations in the co-operation between States, of the variable capacities of the international organisations, of the growing importance of non-governmental organisations, of the individual and civil society roles.'

The competition between distinct models was also observed by Rui Feijó and Susana Viegas (2016), as well as Lúcio Sousa and Vicente Paulino (2016). For the former, the reconquest of independence was accompanied by an opening for modernist cultural models, whose discourses on the subject figured in the defence of modern nation-building by both the Timorese – who, in the diaspora, left for other countries and brought such values from their host countries – and by international agents who participated in the state-building process, in a situation of international co-operation, to 'help' Timor-Leste after the Indonesian occupation and the Portuguese colonial period. For Sousa and Paulino (2016: 5), inserting Timor-Leste in a shared context in Southeast Asia, material and immaterial heritage is constituted as a space of dispute, including economic, social and political assets, with the occurrence of a change in the region from the developmentalist focus of the 1990s to 'an active investment in its cultural heritage' in the twenty-first century.

Similar to what happened with other former colonies, the decolonisation paths they followed posed questions related to various temporalities – before and during the colonial mark and, in the case of Timor-Leste, also adding the Indonesian time and the United Nations administration mandate or period- which directly affected the collective understandings about the notion of national unity and the feelings of belonging. It is precisely at this point that authors like Michael Leach (2012: 220) interpret that 'Timor-Leste's sense of national identity was weaker than presumed, shallowly rooted and fractured along a variety of generational, regional, linguistic and political lines.'

Another interpretation regarding the feeling of national belonging points to a different understanding: if there had not been a deep sense of own cultural identity among the Timorese population, it would not have been possible to resist the military invasion and the intense process of cultural indonesiation for so many years. Unequivocal evidence of this mentality is the existence of a school – *Externato de São José*, in Díli – which persisted in maintaining all teaching, from pre-school to secondary school, in Portuguese during the occupation, with the Indonesian authorities having persecuted the language. When interviewed, the students and teachers of the school were clear: a distinctive identity forged over centuries based on language and culture distinguished them from the Indonesians. It was in this school that the main organisations of the clandestine resistance emerged, being decisive to link the Timorese military front to the diplomatic front

and to reverse the international situation in favour of Timor-Leste's liberation. The independence and the approved Constitution of the Constituent Assembly of the new state affirmed these principles (Ferreira 2020).

After the withdrawal of Indonesia and the entry of the United Nations administration filled with technicians of the most diverse nationalities, Leach (2012) argues that this international community was more concerned with state-building than with nation-building. The former focuses on governance, institutions, accountability and the rule of law. The latter refers to a cultural process to form a cohesive political community that would sustain the development of a functioning state. Fortifying a national identity 'under its own hand' is challenging for Timor-Leste, being both state and nation (Leach 2017: 232). For Borgerhoff (2006 quoted in Leach 2012: 220), nation-building is the 'deliberate interest- and ideology-based formation of a national format which creates collective identity and affiliation of the population within the nation-state.' However, Leach (2012: 221-222) points out that:

Effective nation formation is therefore not just about lateral integration of different groups through 'deliberate' constructions of national identities and interests, but also about the sustainability of relationships between influential conceptions of traditional community and modern state institutions, and the potential for 'hybrid' forms to promote stability. [...] The tensions between modern and traditional political notions of political authority remain a key challenge for nation builders in Timor-Leste.

Timorese state- and nation-building processes are crossed and permeated by the co-existence of both state-based and customary or *Kultura*-based (Silva 2014; Viegas and Feijó 2017; Fernandes 2020) social institutions. Viegas and Feijó (2017) call this coexistence between traditional referents and those of a modern state 'cohabitation,' – a mark in the way state-building and nation-building processes have been developed – characterizing, if it is possible to speak in those terms, the Timorese national identity itself (Nogueira and Araújo 2019; Nogueira 2020).

The diversity of combination between these distinct socio-cultural referents, sometimes conflictive, sometimes peacefully negotiated or even as a hybridism of both (Canclini 1995), corresponds to the Timorese way of performing modernities, to use the expression and the meanings attributed by Kelly Silva (2020), through technologies and pedagogies that operate in different social situations of Timorese life.

Inspired by Judith Butler (2012), Viegas and Feijó (2017: 20) remember that cohabitation implies two ideas: '(a) [...] that it is inevitable that we coexist in the world with others in a 'non-desired proximity', meaning one that does not derive from our volition or choice; (b) [...] plurality, and for this reason conviviality in a plural environment is inevitably permeated by tensions.'

The concern seems to be focused on the following idea highlighted by Sousa and Paulino (2016: 5):

In the discussion around memory, identity and heritage in Southeast Asian societies, the perception and appropriation of the sense of memory(s) and the notion of heritage(s) stand out, involving local intelligibilities about these concepts and their accommodation in ‘personal senses,’ ‘regional senses,’ ‘interregional senses,’ ‘national senses’ and, equally, ‘transnational senses.’ This sequence is not linear, as it may shift between the different levels, in one direction or another.

It is within this framework, with multiple logics and engendering the risk of constituting a new type of colonisation by the state and its constructors, that Leach (2017: 232) highlights the significant role that young people have. The average age in Timor-Leste is around 18 years old, and this portion of the population has its own ideas about national identity. The young population is fluent in Tetum and familiarised with the Indonesian language, being increasingly educated in Portuguese. Therefore, the country is indeed marked by cultural and linguistic diversity (Goglia and Afonso 2012).

## The geopolitics and the Sea Treaty

Timor-Leste constitutes an important case study in international relations, not just because of the complex process of state- and nation-building, but also because of its geographical singularities associated with *Mar de Timor*, which over time have involved the delimitation of maritime boundaries with neighbouring states in the region, especially Indonesia and Australia. The great attraction in dispute has been the exploration of oil and natural gas. The *Mar de Timor* separates the south coast of the island of Timor from the northeast coast of Australia, with a width of about 250 miles at its narrowest point and 290 nautical miles at its widest. According to Cunha (2020: 106), the ‘geographical reality in the Timor Sea does not facilitate border delimitation, since the continental shelf of the Timor Sea presents discontinuous features.’ To have an idea, as analysed by Cunha (2020: 106), ‘the delimitation of the maritime boundaries between Timor-Leste and Australia in the South Sea appeared problematic’ at least since the 1960s.

Although Portugal and Timor-Leste have claimed the definition of a median line as a criterion for border delimitation, Australia refused the proposal, even after the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea took effect, invoking the natural extension of its continental shelf. According to Cunha (2020: 107), on behalf of Timor-Leste, Portugal always refused this reading of the delimitation of maritime boundaries in the Timor Territorial Sea, ‘generating a space in the maritime boundary delimitation known as the Timor Gap (since all the other delimitations of the Australian maritime boundaries, with Indonesia, were defined in 1972).’ During the Indonesian occupation of Timor-Leste (1975-1999), Indonesia negotiated an agreement with Australia for the joint exploitation of *Mar de Timor*.



Figure 1 – Location of Timor-Leste and of Mar de Timor

Source: Adapted from Gomes, Morgado and Coelho 2012: 11

Australia's interests in Portuguese Timor are mainly because of the existing resources there, and became known after the Second World War, with the Australians trying to delay or even prevent the return of the Portuguese administration. Some officials even assumed the desire to acquire the interests of the Portuguese in the territory by purchase. Ambition only receded when Canberra understood that the departure of Timor from the Portuguese state would make Indonesia the beneficiary of this change to the detriment of Australia (Lima 2002).

In light of new documents, Australia's old pretensions in the *Mar de Timor* seem to have gained strength in 1975, and may have decisively shaped its foreign policy, which came to support the process of Indonesian occupation. In 'Crossing the Line: Australia's Secret History in the Timor Sea,' based on the advice that the Australian ambassador to Indonesia, Richard Woolcott, was giving to the government of Malcolm Fraser, Mcgrath (2019) draws a similar conclusion. The former diplomat stated in a telegram that it would be easier to negotiate the Timor Gap with the Indonesians than with the Portuguese or independent Timorese, and even though he knew that he was 'recommending a pragmatic

position, rather than an ethical one, but that was all about national interest and foreign policy' (Woolcott quoted in Mcgrath 2019: 189, freely translated).

As Mcgrath (2019: 191) says, following the invasion, the elite of the Australian bureaucratic system 'were so committed to Kissinger's realism that they covered up reports of massacres, torture and starvation in pursuit of what they believed to be Australia's national interest: closing the East Timor Gap.'

After restoring independence, the old agreement between Australia and Indonesia was no longer accepted by the state of Timor-Leste (Cunha 2020). Permanent negotiations between Timor-Leste and Australia began, but they went through very difficult times, especially with the alleged espionage that Australia decided to carry out on Timorese officials, which ended up becoming public in 2013 based on information provided by someone who became known as Witness K (Knaus 2019).

An agreement was then signed between Timor-Leste and Australia about it only in 2018 – this is the first treaty signed under Annex V of the UN Convention dealing with the Law of the Sea. However, with regard to Indonesia in the post-independence period, the process of delimiting the maritime borders is still pending, as is the conclusion of the process regarding the land border. In fact, delimitation encompasses complex aspects 'considering the nature of the territories, which share an island, including an enclave and several other islands and islets' (Cunha 2020: 119).

As can be seen, the *Mar de Timor* is of geopolitical importance in the region, not only encompassing economic interests, but also political ones, which concern the relations between Timor-Leste, the former colonial and post-colonial metropolis (Portugal), the former intervening country (Indonesia), and the country which has long wanted to increase its influence in Timor (Australia). We must also remember that Indonesia is a member country of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and that Timor-Leste has been trying for some time to become a member country of the Association (Cabral 2017).

The geographic characteristics of Timor-Leste are highlighted by Gomes (2018), since the country can serve as maritime and air support for some acting multinational operators. Therefore, the author argues that the country per se should be thought and think of itself as a maritime state, integrating the sea into the National Strategy and nation-building processes. Within this alignment, the signature of the Delimitation of Maritime Boundaries Treaty between Australia and Timor-Leste on 6 March 2018 was celebrated by both parties involved. On its official page, the Australian government (Australia 2018) qualifies this occasion as 'a new chapter in the longstanding and deep ties between Australia and Timor-Leste.' Furthermore, the discourses of politicians involved such as Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Julie Bishop, Timor-Leste's Minister in Office, Ágio Pereira, and Timor-Leste's Chief Negotiator, Xanana Gusmão, as well as Secretary-General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, appeal to a solution that comprises a complex legal and political process mediated by an international Conciliation Commission.

The Australian representative classified the occasion as 'a historical day for both nations,' stating that it is particularly important 'for Timor-Leste and another step forward

in Timor-Leste's Journey as a sovereign nation' and reinforcing that 'both governments thought this action was fair and equitable.' Minister Pereira highlighted that it was 'a good treaty,' 'equitable,' and emphasised 'the tremendous leadership of both countries and the immense efforts of the Conciliation Commission.' Gusmão stressed that the day was historic, with the delimitation of the maritime borders based on international law. He also thanked the Conciliation Commission and stressed that the constructive engagement and spirit of co-operation that surrounded the treaty 'provides hope for the peaceful resolution of disputes around the world.' Finally, the UN Secretary-General stated that 'the maritime boundary and the Greater Sunrise Special Regime places Australia and Timor-Leste in a better position to exercise their rights under UNCLOS [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea]' (Australia 2018).

The role played by the Conciliation Commission formed from UNCLOS and the dispute mechanisms surrounding the *Mar de Timor* made the case unique. The Commission operated for 15 months, with regular meetings. According to Tamada (2020: 321), the 'Timor Sea conciliation led to the successful settlement of the long-standing deadlock between the parties that had hitherto not been settled by negotiation and had no possibility of being settled by litigation [...] or arbitration.' For him, the economic factor was decisive in the maritime delimitation of *Mar de Timor* – in particular 'the sharing ratio of the natural resources in the Greater Sunrise Gas Fields,' the main field in dispute. The relevance of the issue of oil and gas exploration and commercialisation in *Mar de Timor* as fundamental to maritime delimitation can be perceived by the order in which the negotiations took place: first an agreement was established on the exploration of natural resources (oil and gas), then the delimitation of the borders.

Coutinho and Gala (2011) state that the several negotiations between<sup>2</sup> Australia and Timor-Leste considering *Mar de Timor* are better explained by *realpolitik* reasons than by legal arguments. The arguments presented by Timor-Leste about the economic importance of the resources for its development as well as for the process of national construction towards self-determination were claimed by the UNCLOS Commission within the process of compulsory conciliation between both parties and which lead to the Sea Treaty in 2018. What are the specificities of that conciliation? According to Tamada (2020: 331):

In its essence, conciliation encompasses processes from various dispute settlement means. Historically, it has been characterised as a mixture of diplomatic methods – such as negotiation, good offices or mediation – and arbitral or judicial methods. Similarly, the *Timor Sea* Conciliation Commission understood that '[p]rocedurally, conciliation seeks to combine the function of a mediator with the more active and objective role of a commission of inquiry' (TSCR, para. 52, note 33, emphasis added).

In the opinion of Cunha (2020), none of the parties obtained total victory in their claims. The front delimitation of the maritime border, along the median line, corresponds to a long-standing claim. This claim was formulated by the Timorese post-Restoration of

Independence and also by the Portuguese State. The decision was cutting off the Greater Sunrise oil field to the west in a manner considered fair by the parties with regard to sharing natural resources. The terms of exploitation of the cross-border oil fields still have to be defined. Below is a map containing information on delimitation of the maritime border and the oil and gas exploration areas with the original positions of the parties:

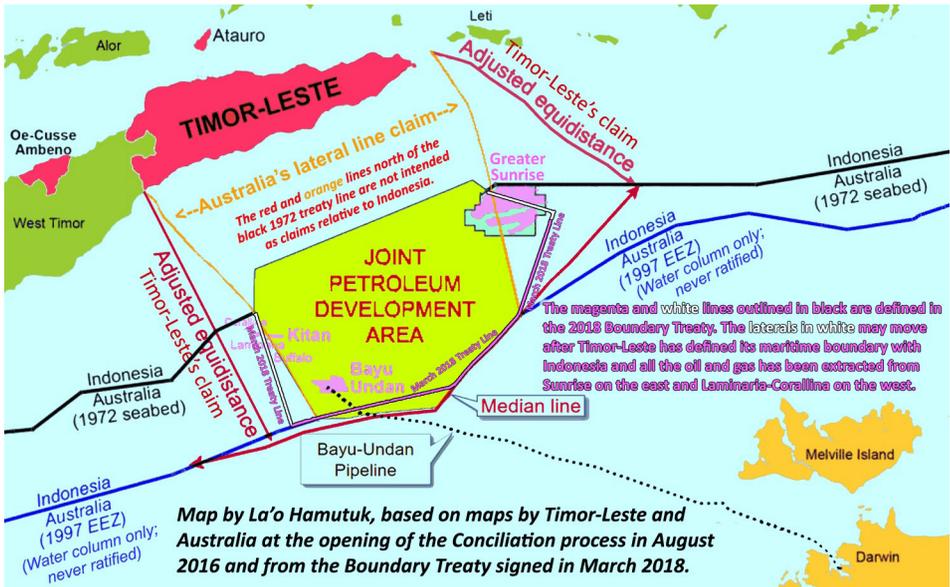


Figure 2 – The original positions of the parties

Source: Cunha (2020: 117)

Cunha (2020) clarifies that the cross-border delimitation lines may be adjusted after the commercial exploration of oil and gas fields is exhausted. Moreover, it is still conditioned to the delimitation of the maritime border between Timor-Leste and Indonesia. In Cunha's (2020: 119) view, what seems to prevail, however, is the logic of good neighbours, expressed in the preamble of the Treaty that highlights the 'spirit of co-operation and friendship.'

As Redon (2014) emphasises, the question of borders is linked to the question of state sovereignty. Although maritime borders do not have the same material significance as land borders in our consciousness, as we are not born and raised in that space, the truth is that some 200 states have sought to assert their 'maritime territory' since the 1950s. In the same vein, and in light of current knowledge of the political and economic advantages of maritime boundaries, decisive questions arise for the development and perpetuation of the nation-state of Timor-Leste. It is especially important for the small and poor state to guarantee the symbolic and material affirmation of its territorial interests, since both are the basis for identity affirmation, access to its natural resources (especially the oil and gas of *Mar de Timor*) and economic returns. These factors support

state-building and the sovereign development of the nation. The idea of the just conquest of its natural borders, both land and sea, promotes an important symbolic victory of sovereignty and material at the level of economic resources. Furthermore, it strengthens the collective awareness of the need for modern state organisation and qualification of human resources towards effective independence and well-being of Timorese citizens.

The latest agreement with Australia under the UN on the *Mar de Timor* favours Timor-Leste, however is not entirely fair (Mcgrath 2019). Despite the disparities in the political and economic power of the two nations, Timor-Leste has gained in terms of nation-state assertion by 'becoming the first nation in the world to utilise the compulsory conciliation provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea by securing [as a boundary] a median line in Mar de Timor between Timor-Leste and Australia' (Mcgrath 2019: 194).

## Educational and cultural dimensions of the Sea in (from) Timor

If I could  
capture between my fingers  
the sights of the sea  
and share them with  
children  
[...]  
Oh, sea of mine!  
why do you wait?  
why don't you give?  
why don't you feel?  
why don't you hear?

Immersed in my thoughts  
I was suddenly shaken

From the sea, my sea,  
out of the bellies of ships  
tremors came

I looked at the erupting sky  
the sights of the sea were  
cries of agony  
the gentle breeze  
The smell of dust and blood  
the kiss of the foam  
the death-rattle  
the sea's slumber  
*the pebbles of the gravestone  
and the pretty shells  
traced  
the destiny of the Homeland!*  
(Gusmão 1998)

The Timorese have a close relationship with the sea. This can be seen in their founding myth (the Myth of the Crocodile – see the section “The Sea in the textbook of Geography” below), in their daily life in fishing activities with the rituals involved in them, in the way the theme is approached in didactic materials and in their world-renowned political poems.

As in the above poem, ‘My Sea of Timor’, Xanana Gusmão (1998) refers to the sea several times in his *Mar Meu*. Nine poems compose the book announcing the state of

torpor and deprivation of rights, a reality sustained for 25 years for the real achievement of independence. This kind of resistance literature was prepared in the period in which colonialism was in force, fulfilling a function of denunciation, opposition and combat to the imperialist power. Such resistance takes place in a socio-literary reality resulting from political and cultural imposition in which any kind of autonomy (whether systemic or political) is absent. In this sense, it maintains its own aesthetic code which is far removed from considerations in terms of literary quality or even integration into a world canon (periodization and literary genres, literature as a luxury or the exclusive claim of the pleasure of the text, among others). From the outset, it is clear that the book *Mar Meu* is placed at the service of the cause of social and national liberation of the people of Timor-Leste and that it is done through the analogy with the sea that does not belong to him.

On the one hand, if the literature expresses the feelings and the symbolic dimensions of the sea that bathes the island, on the other hand, the *Timor oan* (sons of Timor, in Tetum) differentiate this sea, giving it distinct classifications and names – *Tasi Mane* and *Tasi Feto* – which affect the way of relating to each one of them. *Tasi Mane* (literally, Sea Man) refers to the Timor Sea that borders Australia, considered a sea of rough waves. *Tasi Feto* (Sea Woman), on the coast, is considered a sea of calmer waves.

From a cultural perspective, there is the construction of an imaginary based on the opposition Man/Woman, wild waters/calm waters, which is in line with a typical cosmology based on binomials such as *maun/malae*, older brother/younger brother, *mane/feto*, *Kultura/State*, among others. Here, with regard to the discussion on delimiting the maritime border with Australia, we refer to *Tasi Mane*. However, in the relationship between the imaginary around the place of the sea for the Timorese and the relationship they have with it and that is expressed in all the analysed manuals, we refer to the sea as a whole that bathes Timor-Leste, or *Tasi Mane* and *Tasi Feto*.

As previously mentioned, education plays a central role in the collective construction of ideas and values, therefore sustaining nation-building processes. In fact, education and training are ‘vital to the country’s economic growth and development’ (Nogueira 2021: 299). The relevance of education in the nation-building process is also highlighted in Timor-Leste’s Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030 – PED (RDTL 2011: 18).

Furthermore, it is important to highlight that the secondary education currently in force in Timor-Leste is in itself the result of international collaboration, namely between political and educational institutions of Timor-Leste and Portugal (Ramos and Teles 2012; Martins and Ferreira 2014; Ferreira et al. 2017; Lopes 2020) constituting a relevant case study *per se* in the process of state and nation-building since secondary education curriculum is theoretically both a product and a promoter of *Kultura*.

The curricular plan for General Secondary Education (GSE), and its implementation regime, was approved by the Council of Ministers on 7 September 2011, of the IV Constitutional Government, and translated into Decree-Law No. 47/2011 of 19 October, published in the Official Gazette No. 38, Series I, of 19 October 2011. In its preamble we can read that, it had been ‘possible to gather the efforts and knowledge of Timorese technicians, of specialists with knowledge of the best international practices in this area and also of education experts’ for this purpose (GRDTL 2011). In order to frame the

documental analysis that was undertaken, it is important to briefly describe the process of curricular reorganisation of the GSE in Timor-Leste.

Soon after the 1999 referendum, under the auspices of the United Nations, which led to the independence of Timor-Leste from Indonesia, the Timorese leaders, and the international partners involved in the reconstruction of the country and the building of the state, identified education/training of the people as one of the most important challenges for the construction of peace, freedom and democracy, as well as a productive and sustainable economy towards poverty reduction (UNDP 1999; World Bank 2003).

During the IV Constitutional Government (2007-2012), significant steps were taken towards the development of the Timorese education system. For example, the Basic Law of Education was published (PNTL 2008), in which the Portuguese language was affirmed as the language of instruction (Article 8) as in the Constitution of the *República Democrática de Timor-Leste* (Democratic Republic of East Timor). In section III of the Basic Law, namely in its Article 12, it is stressed that school education must '[d]evelop knowledge and appreciation for the values that characterise Timorese identity, official and national languages, Timorese history and culture, in a perspective of universalistic humanism and solidarity and co-operation among peoples.'

In 2009, the Minister of Education of Timor-Leste (ME), João Câncio, requested the support of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (FCG) to restructure the GSE curricula in Timor-Leste, aiming to conceptualise the *first* national curriculum for this education level. Until that date, it was the Indonesian curriculum that was still in force with some adaptations. With this goal in mind, the FCG and the Portuguese Institute for Development Support (IPAD), with the technical support of the University of Aveiro, prepared and jointly presented a specific project to the Portuguese Language Fund (Portugal), which was approved for funding and designated '*Falar Português – Reestruturação do Ensino Secundário Geral em Timor-Leste*' ('Speak in Portuguese – restructuring the general secondary education – GSE – in East Timor'). The plan for reorganizing the curriculum of GSE was prepared by a team from the University of Aveiro.<sup>3</sup> This team worked closely with national political and technical authorities, while also consulting many Timorese teachers (Martins et al. 2011). A program<sup>4</sup> for each of the discipline that integrates the GSE was produced, as well as the corresponding student textbooks for each year – 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade (Martins et al. 2010; Martins, 2013).

As already documented in Martins (2013), and Martins and Ferreira (2013), this was a co-operation for a development project involving a partnership between the Timorese and Portuguese partners. The aim was to promote capacity building of the Ministry of Education of Timor-Leste, namely in the domain of curriculum development. The GSE was assumed to have a pre-specialisation character, as opposed to generalist training. Thus, it was conceived to be divided into two areas: Sciences and Technologies (S&T)<sup>5</sup> and Social Sciences and Humanities (S&H).<sup>6</sup> A General Component<sup>7</sup> common to both areas was defined through which it is intended that students achieve important knowledge and competences at a personal and social level, regardless of the domain of specific knowledge they choose. Although transnational secondary education guidelines were

followed, it was envisaged to adapt those guidelines to the Timorese socio-cultural reality and to the legitimate and sovereign interests of the Timorese people.

The presence of *Mar* in (from) Timor in the Timorese secondary curriculum is described in the following paragraphs, first in the official programs of four disciplines (Biology, Geology, History and Geography) and then in two textbooks (Geography and History), corresponding to the disciplines and programs in which the presence of the sea was higher. It is important to highlight that the curriculum corresponds to the set of learning areas which are considered socially relevant by the Ministry of Education and that are mandatory to be taught by the teacher of the public schools (Roldão and Almeida 2018). The curriculum of a given educational system is expressed in its programs and informs the contents and activities of the adopted textbooks. In the specific case of Timor-Leste, there are only textbooks available from one source, namely those approved by the government. Therefore, it can be assumed that the four programs and two textbooks which were analysed sustain the educational activities that occur in school at a national scale.

## The sea in the programs

The following results regarding the 'place of the sea' in Timor-Leste in four programs of the following disciplines emerged from the analysis:

- Biology – there is no explicit mention of *Mar de Timor*. The sea, in general terms, is mentioned along the document, but not as a thematic section *per se*;
- Geology – one explicit mention of *Mar de Timor*, namely as a contextual case to explore and study the tides within the unit 2 'The Earth: the Shell and the Egg'. No specific theme is specifically dedicated to the sea;
- Geography – The study of the sea is present in the 'Unit 3 – Resources of Timor-Leste: Opportunities and Threats'. The cultural and natural resources are problematized in this unit, and the sea is materialised in an explicit theme entitled 'The Sea: Potentialities and Threats.' The authors of the manual suggest a total number of 10 lessons to be dedicated to this theme.
- History – The sea in and from Timor is present throughout the textbooks for the three years of schooling, taking a more significant expression in the units 'The Pacific – Archipelagos and Margins', 'From the Atlantic to the Pacific: Europeans in Expansion', and 'Timor-Leste: the Turning Point of 1974; the Period between 1975 and 1999.' The sea is explored in the book through the imagery concerning the first settlers that came from the sea, as well as Europeans, the role of the sea in local and global commerce, and its remarkable value in terms of international geopolitics and natural resources (biological, food, energy).

The comparative analysis of these four programs revealed a higher presence of the theme *Mar de Timor* in the disciplines of History and Geography, justifying a more detailed analysis of the corresponding textbooks.

## The sea in the History textbook (10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade)

In Thematic Unit 3 of 10<sup>th</sup> grade textbook, dedicated to ‘The Asia-Pacific and the First Stage of Globalisation’, there is a chapter dedicated to ‘The Pacific – Archipelagos and Margins’, but also establishing the relationship with other oceans, especially in a chapter called ‘From the Atlantic to the Pacific: Europeans in Expansion.’ (Vieira, Mendes and Neves 2012) Furthermore, it is worth highlighting the presence of an image of a map where the *Mar de Timor* is visible, integrating maritime interconnections, navigation routes, as well as trade and cultural and political influences (Vieira, Mendes and Neves 2012). Further on, the political and cultural influence that extended across the sea from the most dynamic and developed regions is underlined:

Regions such as Java, where the Majapahit Empire had been established, showed this cultural and political change. In the mid-14th century, this empire combined the resources of an agricultural territorial base with the income from maritime commerce, whose radius of action included the Malay Peninsula, Borneo, Celebes, the Moluccas and the small Sunda Islands, as far as Timor. (Vieira, Mendes and Neves 2012: 99)

In the case of Timor, the influences which came from the sea are referred to as having long remained confined to its coast, with the interior maintaining the ancestral rhythms of life, without external influence. However, everything would change in the sixteenth century with the arrival of Europeans to Timor, which was provided by the ‘maritime expansion on a world scale’ (Vieira, Mendes and Neves 2012: 104), with a map of the navigations. Here the themes relating to the expansion of science, culture and religion are developed, which would also end up marking the history of Timor and the formation of its Christian and Lusophone identity, but also the difficulties that had to be overcome with the use of science and technology to develop the great maritime navigation and use the sea as a great way of globalisation, pointing out, in a caption of an image of Christopher Columbus, his utopia: ‘Between the end of the East and the end of the West is only a small sea’ (Vieira, Mendes and Neves 2012: 124). Practical activities are also proposed to students which highlight the importance of maritime activity, in particular port activity (Vieira, Mendes and Neves 2012: 125-126), but also about the political disputes over the navigability of the sea, contrasting the idea of a ‘sea closed’ to only a few nations with that of a ‘free sea’ or sea open to all, including wars waged at sea (Vieira, Mendes and Neves 2012: 125-132).

On page 134 of the textbook, the importance of the sea in forming Timor is emphasised, namely with the transcription of an old legend about the four Timorese kingdoms which originated from four tribes that arrived by sea, written by Ruy Cinatti:

With the passage of time, the kingdom of Huai-Hali came to achieve great prestige and hegemony among the neighbouring peoples. Its kings, who called themselves Sons of God (in Tetum,

*Maromac-ôan*), were attributed supernatural powers; the people addressed their prayers to them. (Vieira, Mendes and Neves 2012: 134)

A map of the island of Timor (see Figure 3) is shown below as an illustrative example with the *Mar de Timor* from the history textbook replicated, underlining the idea, very present in the imaginary and in the Timorese legends, that the settlers actually arrived by sea, at different times.

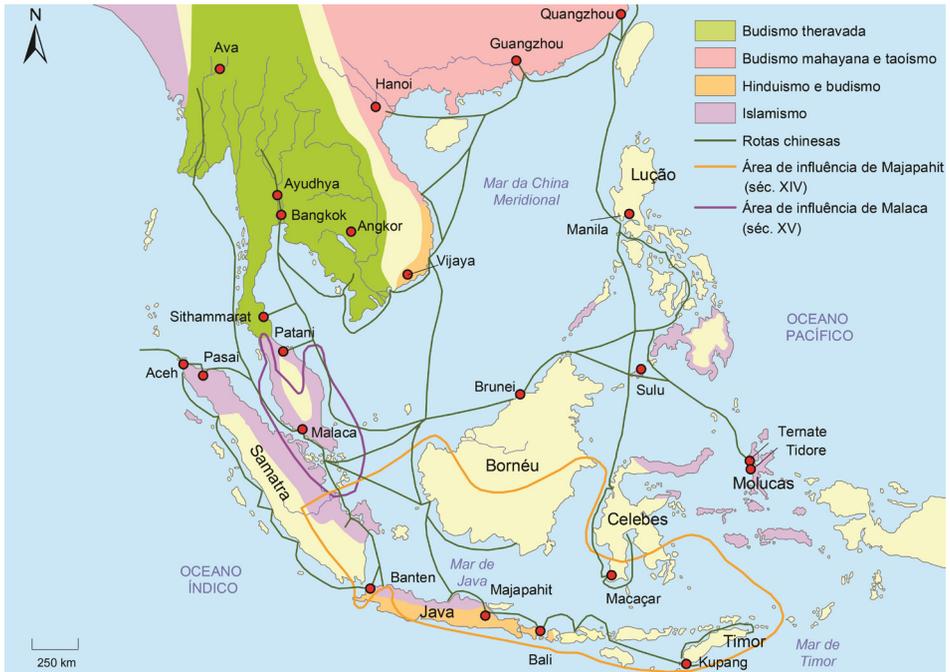


Figure 3 – One illustrative example of the presence of *Mar de Timor* in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade History textbook

Source: Vieira, Mendes and Neves (2012: 97)

There are references in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade textbook to the tenuous participation of Timor in the rich regional trade before the arrival of the Portuguese mainly with a view to collect sandalwood. The island enters the commercial network of the Portuguese Empire from the 17<sup>th</sup> century and becomes more significant ‘in the circuits of the East, dominated by Muslim and Chinese merchants’ (Vieira, Mendes and Neves 2013: 44). In Thematic Unit 5, section 2.5, under the heading ‘From Southeast Asia to the Oceanic World’, the dynamics of the maritime trade of the Malay principalities is underlined, but also the increased competition from the European powers in the different ports and their influence on the production systems, more oriented towards exportation. A map highlights the possessions and supporting points of the European powers and the United States of America in the Southeast Asia and the Indian and Pacific Oceans at the time of the industrial

revolution, underlining the strategic interest that the archipelagos of the Pacific Ocean had for these powers, which led them to be progressively occupied and lose their political independence (Vieira, Mendes and Neves 2013: 83). Reflecting the attempts of economic dynamisation of Portuguese Timor in the nineteenth century, especially through the investment in coffee culture, the fact that only Dili had a maritime port which allowed larger ships and the ‘absence of regular sea routes’ (Vieira, Mendes and Neves 2013: 94) appear with great importance to explain the economic difficulties of the region.

Finally, the importance of the sea is especially addressed in the framework of the Cold War in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade textbook, with emphasis given to the ‘essential sea passages’, which allowed decisive circulation for the interests of the powers, with special attention given to the Ombai and Wetar straits, which, ‘due to the depth of their waters, allowed safe passage of North American nuclear submarines’ (Vieira, Mendes and Neves 2014: 130). The independence hypothesis of Portuguese Timor could endanger the control of these maritime areas, which was considered essential to the Allies’ interests, and guaranteed in the framework of the partnership between the USA and Indonesia. The interest in the *Mar de Timor* was added to the strategic importance of the sea north of Timor:

To the global framework of Indonesian concerns we can also add that the evolution of the oil crisis of the 1970s made the advantages of the Mar de Timor more evident due to the economic weight of its resources and the influence that their control could provide. (Vieira, Mendes and Neves 2014: 131)

The textbook explains the enlargement of regional interests in *Mar de Timor*, namely by Australia, both in economic – petroleum and natural gas prospecting – and in political terms – with the fear that an independent Timor, in the framework of the Cold War could ally itself to the communist bloc. This would be less favourable to Australian interests than to Indonesia (Vieira, Mendes and Neves 2014: 131-132). The agreement between these two countries for the division of the resources from *Mar de Timor*, namely on fishing (1981) and hydrocarbons (1989) is highlighted (Vieira, Mendes and Neves 2013: 138-139). Thus, an idea of the strategic value of *Mar de Timor* becomes clear, which contributed to the action of the regional powers being unfavourable to the independence of Timor-Leste and to the sovereignty of the Timorese. The importance of the *Mar de Timor* returns in the context of the country’s independence, with the renegotiation with Australia of the 1989 agreement, known as the ‘Timor Gap’ (Vieira, Mendes and Neves 2013: 158).

## The sea in the Geography textbook

The sea has its place as a decisive element of the Timorese landscape in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade textbook, as well as an element of external action in the context of non-renewable natural resources, with attention to fossil fuels. Associated environmental problems and potential are highlighted (Gomes, Morgado and Coelho 2012: 60-78). The sea appears throughout the pages as a central part of the Timorese landscapes, namely as valuable place of

biodiversity to be protected, as an important element in the water cycle and climate, and as a renewable natural resource. It deserves a special section that closes the manual, 'The Sea – Features, Potentials and Threats' (Gomes, Morgado and Coelho 2012: 147-159).

The highlight in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade textbook is the section 'The Children of the Great Crocodile', in the chapter which deals with 'Cultural Resources – an explanation of the present in the light of the past.' The importance given to the sea in the mythological foundation of Timor is indisputable, as the best-known myth is that of the origin of the island in a great crocodile, which leads the Timorese to treat, even today, the crocodiles as their grandfather (Gomes, Morgado and Coelho 2013). The myth of the Children of the Great Crocodile is described in the Manual as follows:

A long time ago, a little boy discovered on land a baby crocodile, too fragile to reach the sea and therefore doomed to dry out in the sun. The child took pity on the crocodile, picked it up and carried it to the sea. Thus, a solid friendship was born, despite the appetite for human flesh that sometimes crossed the crocodile's brain. The boy and the crocodile made several trips together until the crocodile reached an advanced age. When he felt death approaching, the crocodile said to the boy: Friend, there is no reward worthy of the good deed you did for me long ago by saving my life. When I die I will become a land, a country where you and your descendants will live off my body. (Gomes, Morgado and Coelho 2012: 123)

The importance of the crocodile, a traveller from the seas who became an island to repay a boy for what he had done for him, is central to the Timorese identity that is inevitably linked to the sea. As can be seen in the manuals, the crocodile came to decorate much of the traditional local artistic expression, for example in textiles or sculptures. The myth of the origin of the Timorese population as people who came from the sea throughout the ages is also mentioned (Gomes, Morgado and Coelho 2012: 124).

It is important to highlight that Timor-Leste has a significant oral tradition focused on the construction of the memory of the past, which circulates contemporaneously among different generations. Myths, legends and tales are some of the forms of Timorese cultural expression, full of meanings that refer to moralities, social values and beliefs. They correspond to the interpretations of the world by that collectivity. As analysed by Lévi-Strauss ([1978]1987; [1958]2008), the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model for the solution of a contradiction. It is simultaneously in language and beyond it; it always refers to past events, to the 'origins of the world', but also to present and future times, forming a 'permanent structure' ([1958]2008: 224); and its essence is found in the story told. In this sense, mythological thought plays the 'role of conceptual thought' ([1978]1987: 29).

Finally, in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade textbook, the sea appears with great evidence in Thematic Unit 3, 'The Resources of Timor-Leste', namely on the biodiversity of coastal areas, the different types of fishing existing in Timor-Leste, the cultural and festive aspects linked

to it and to fishermen, as well as the importance of the sea in food (Gomes, Morgado and Coelho 2014: 51-70). The importance of sea ports and the sea for the export and import of products for economic activity, determining the installation of manufacturing units near the ports, shows that the sea is determinant for the country (Gomes, Morgado and Coelho 2014: 82). Tourism activities linked to the sea are also highlighted. The relevance of Timor Sea oil and gas are highlighted in the section on foreign trade (Gomes, Morgado and Coelho 2014: 119-120) and the infrastructures in contact with the exterior, highlighting the maritime ports (Gomes, Morgado and Coelho 2014: 133).

## Closing remarks

Within this article we aimed to describe the place of the sea in the Timorese geopolitics, culture and education, sustaining our argumentation in official policy documents, in literature (Xanana Gusmão's *Mar Meu*), as well as the programs and the teaching materials of General Secondary Education. Particular attention was given regarding the *Mar de Timor* (Timor Sea). Historical evidence reveals that the delimitation of its borders has been very controversial and difficult because of the resources contained therein. Therefore, the authors aimed to evaluate to what extent the strategic dimension of the sea (*Tasi Mane* and *Tasi Feto*) is present and in what sense traditional cultural values and practices are combined with the policies of a modern state, defining both its international relations and Timorese national identity.

The co-existence of both state-based and customary or *Kultura*-based social institutions influences several dimensions of Timorese social life, such as world perception, sense of belonging to the same social universe, construction of a collective memory and the notion of a shared heritage. In this regard, the place of the *Mar de Timor* in the Timorese imagination and the issues related to it are crossed by a logic based on these two references – modern state and *Kultura*. This is the case of the presence of the theme in didactic material adopted in Timor-Leste and also in the negotiations between the country and Australia involving the *Mar de Timor*, the delimitation of maritime boundaries between the two and the exploration of oil and gas in the region.

It is worth noting that one of the main negotiators on the Timorese side (Xanana Gusmão) has an atavistic relationship with the sea, including his own memories and feelings, which link him to customs (*Kultura*) and the process of building a modern state, as expressed in his book *Mar Meu*. This expression can be found both in the defence of maritime boundaries and Timorese political-economic interests on the issue and in the poetic-literary field in which he weaves a direct relationship between the importance of the sea (*Tasi Feto* and *Tasi Mane*) and the notion of shared identity.

Taking the analogy between freedom and the sea present in Gusmão's poem ('My Sea of Timor') further, it is possible to interpret *Tasi Feto* as a sea without political disputes (calm waters) and *Tasi Mane* as a sea which includes wild waters.

At the Oceans Conference held in Lisbon (Portugal) between 27 June and 1 July 2022, the head of the Timorese delegation and former president, Xanana Gusmão, mentioned the success in delimiting the maritime borders with Australia and the efforts to

achieve the same ‘Timor[-East]’s identity which “is anchored in the sea” (ONU News, 2022). Xanana Gusmão’s party recently won the parliamentary election (May 2023).

The speech was in line with the demonstration he held on the occasion of the signing of the Maritime Boundary Delimitation treaty between Australia and Timor-Leste on 6 March 2018, after a long process that involved several agreements and conflicting positions, and also traversed Timor-Leste’s trajectory under Portuguese, Indonesian, United Nations and independent colonial regimes.

The negotiations between Timor-Leste and Australia were mediated by a United Nations Conciliation Commission (UNCLOS) – which Cunha (2020: 21) classified as ‘one of the most striking in contemporary international law’ – whose actions took into consideration arguments of *realpolitik*, under certain aspects as or more important than legal ones. Among them, the importance of the natural resources (gas and oil) present in the *Mar de Timor* (especially in the Greater Sunrise Gas Fields) for the development of the country and the processes of state- and nation-building ‘under its own hand’.

For this very reason, the treaty delimiting the maritime borders between the two was preceded by the definition of oil and gas exploration and commercialisation. Moreover, the geological characteristics of the *Mar de Timor*, the Timor-Gap, also made the delimitation of these borders difficult. At the end of the signature of the treaty, the parties declared to be satisfied with the results, considering the treaty fair. On the other hand, the delimitation of the maritime border with Indonesia is still a case to be resolved.

Documental analysis of the educational documents revealed that the sea overall and the *Mar de Timor* in particular integrates the contents expressed in both the programs (Biology, Geology, History and Geography) and student textbooks, even though in distinctive intensities. Regarding the History and Geography textbooks, the disciplines were those in which the presence of contents related to *Mar de Timor* was higher, with the follow-up analysis revealing a strong valorisation of the Timorese identity and political, cultural and economic strategic interests.

The sea and the *Mar de Timor* are part of the contents presented, highlighting potentialities, but also dangers and risks. The approaches to the theme often express emic ideas, values and perceptions that blend the lenses of *Kultura* with those of the modern State. It is also important to highlight that the restructuring of the secondary education system was the product of international co-operation, namely between Portugal and Timor-Leste. The team responsible for the reform sought to meet the indications of the Timorese authorities in terms of building national awareness of the country’s strategic interests.

With regard to the sea, especially the *Mar de Timor*, the interests of Timor-Leste are underlined in terms of natural and energy resources, in terms of their contribution to the collective imaginary and cultural identity, and thereby to the affirmation of Timorese sovereignty, according to a historical vision expressed in the Constitution of the nation-state and subsequent legal documents, such as the Basic Law on Education, and strategic documents such as the Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030.

Valorisation of the origins of the settlers who came from the sea, the cultural approach of founding myths that place the origin in the sea, such as the Myth of the Crocodile, or the arrival of the Europeans, and from that moment the entry of Timor into regional and global trade routes, but also the arrival of the Catholic religion and the Portuguese language, and historical legacies which marked the distinctive identity of the Timorese people in the region all stand out from the analysis of the teaching materials.

On the other hand, the sea appears with its geostrategic and political importance for military reasons, but also because of natural resources (i.e. unique biodiversity reserve, food reserve) and energy (i.e. gas, oil). These apparent advantages pose risks to sovereignty, which in the past contributed to Indonesia's invasion and occupation of Timor for so long. However, it is important to highlight that the curriculum of secondary education in Timor-Leste is broader than the documents under discussion in this paper. The analytical strategy needs to be replicated with other disciplines, both for the programs and the corresponding textbooks (e.g., Biology, Geology, Themes of Literature and Culture) to allow access to a more holistic picture.

Particularly regarding the content related to Timorese myths, it should be noted that they are also studied in Themes of Literature and Culture in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, in its 'Thematic Unit 4/Tradition, Legends, Myths and Traditional Tales.' The foundational 'Myth of the Crocodile' is presented in an 'anonymous version to be circulated online [revised and corrected]', among four others, slightly distinct from the one presented in Geography. In its essence, it carries some elements that are worth highlighting here: the construction of a friendship full of dilemmas between the two beings of distinct natures, in which the boy saves the crocodile but risks being devoured by it; the reciprocity that sustains the relationship of mutual aid and friendship, and the final sacrifice of the crocodile that becomes the island of Timor and gives rise to the 'east' -; and 'the golden disk floating on the waves' of the sea (absent from the Geography Manual), in search of which the boy goes out on the crocodile's back.

A reading of this myth applied to the elaboration process of the treaty on the *Mar de Timor* and the delimitation of the maritime borders in 2018 allows the exercise of elaborating analogies, based on the meanings that an origin myth of a cultural context that values traditions and oral memory can gain in the social, political and economic life of a people.

Thus, regarding the boy's solidarity in the face of the crocodile's difficulty and the friendship negotiated between beings of different natures, there seems to be a sensitivity of both towards the situation of the 'Other' at stake (representing the alterity), contradicting the perception of this 'Other' as an enemy or threat. The boy had the chance to let the crocodile die of hunger and the crocodile considered devouring the human afterwards, however, both chose to make an alliance around the idea of collaboration and mutual help, creating a bond from a moral value.

## Notes

- 1 The concept of *Kultura*, ‘an etymon with Portuguese origins, is also designated as *lisan* (in Tetum) or *adat* (in Bahasa Indonesia), which in Timor-Leste is testimony to the process of discursive formulation that articulates the world of ‘custom’ and the ‘modern’ one’ (Viegas and Feijó 2017: 15).
- 2 For an in-depth look at the Timor Sea treaties and their chronology, consult the official website of the Office of Maritime Borders (RDTL), at <https://www.gfm.tl/pt/biblioteca/acordos-do-mar-de-timor>.
- 3 This team was composed by Isabel P. Martins (co-ordinator), Gillian Moreira, Conceição Santos and Ana Margarida Ramos. Professor Isabel Martins, vice-rector of the University of Aveiro at the time was invited to set up and co-ordinate a team to develop the co-operation project. She is a researcher in didactics/science education with more than forty years of experience, with a special focus on teaching science subjects and teacher training. Refer to [https://blogs.ua.pt/isabelpmartins/?page\\_id=43](https://blogs.ua.pt/isabelpmartins/?page_id=43)
- 4 With the exception of Tetum, Religion and Morals, Physical Education and Sports and Optional Foreign Language.
- 5 The area of Science and Technology (S&T) from secondary general education is composed by Biology, Physics, Geology, Chemistry and Mathematics.
- 6 The area of Social Sciences and Humanities (S&H) from secondary general education is composed by Economics and Quantitative Methods, Geography, History, Sociology and Literature and Culture Themes.
- 7 The common component between S&T and S&H is composed by Citizenship and Social Development, Physical Education and Sports, Indonesian, English, Portuguese, Religion and Morals, Multimedia Technologies and Tetum.

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## Data Availability

Data supporting the findings of this study cannot be shared at this time due to technical or time limitations.

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## Qual é o lugar do Mar de Timor na geopolítica, na cultura e na educação timorenses?

**Resumo:** Timor-Leste é um dos mais novos Estados do século XXI. Foi colônia portuguesa, ocupada pela Indonésia, palco de intervenções das Nações Unidas e, desde sua restauração da independência, passa pelo processo de construção do Estado e da nação. O mar é importante para Timor-Leste em várias dimensões. A questão das fronteiras marítimas do Timor-Leste e o interesse no gás natural e no petróleo têm sido alvo de disputas na região. A dimensão estratégica do mar combina valores e práticas culturais tradicionais com políticas de um Estado moderno, definindo tanto suas relações internacionais quanto a identidade nacional do Timor-Leste. A educação desempenha um papel fundamental na construção de entendimentos coletivos sobre o assunto, já que as escolas servem como importantes canais de comunicação de ideias e valores do Estado. Assim, o objetivo deste artigo é entender o lugar do Mar de Timor na geopolítica, na cultura e na educação de Timor-Leste. O estudo é enquadrado por documentos relativos a tratados de fronteira marítima, bem como pela análise do currículo timorense do ensino secundário geral atualmente em vigor. Essa opção metodológica baseia-se no reconhecimento de que o currículo é, em si, um produto da cooperação internacional no processo de construção do Estado.

**Palavras-chave:** Timor-Leste; Mar de Timor; geopolítica timorense; cultura timorense; construção do Estado.

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