



## Suai Media Arts Project (sMap) - From Rocks to Social Networks Jen Hughes, [mediacircus@bigpond.com](mailto:mediacircus@bigpond.com), April 2011

### Background

The 'Friends of Suai' was formed in Port Phillip in 2000 at the request of Xanana Gusmao, to assist in the recovery of East Timor. It became one of over fifty **local government friendship groups in Victoria**. <http://www.suaimediaspace.org/friends-of-suai-port-phillip/friends-of-suai/>



As a documentary-maker I began following the story eleven years ago. I was interested in **seeing if media and art and representations of place and identity could help two communities communicate across distances** – of geography and culture and I became interested in helping close the digital divide as a way of facilitating our communication.

Rocks, looms, paintbrushes and the humble pencil as well as electronic technologies were used in **activities in the real world**, documented combined and **re-purposed in a variety of places for each community to access**.

On my first trip to Suai I met Ergilio Vicente, a student leader with whom I began to work. It wasn't until 2006 that the Friends of Suai funded the much-wanted technologies that would help us and a youth media-training group was set up in Suai in a Youth Centre. **The project would not have been possible without this partnership and Ergilio's skills, openness and diplomacy.**

### Beginning with Rocks and Remembrance

The first outcome of the **sMap project** was a short documentary titled the Circle of Stones <http://www.suaimediaspace.org/2009/08/07/circle-of-stones/>



Circle of Stones 7<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2000 and Rocks painted by Port Phillip participants. More ...

<http://suaimediaspace.ning.com/photo/rock-mosaic-v4-copy?context=user>

The title comes from a **circle of stones** that I filmed growing around a patch of blackened asphalt outside the Suai Church that marked the place **where many bodies were burned after the Suai Church massacre in Black September 1999** following East Timor's vote for independence. The stones I was told by local Timorese were used to mark the place somebody died when their body could not be found. Over time the circle grew and the **rocks changed from raw symbolism to more intricately marked messages of remembrance like tombstones**. Mourning on the first anniversary of the massacre was focused here and in the rehabilitated Church nearby.

Taking this place of remembrance as the **key sign of the events that brought about the friendship**. I worked with staff of Port Phillip Council to create a **remembrance event also named the Circle of Stones**. Many people in Port Phillip were profoundly moved by the events in East Timor in 1999. **Port Phillip community were invited to write or paint a message to the people of Suai on a rock, and create a circle of stones for the 2nd Anniversary of the massacre in 2001**. They responded with a variety of messages in English, Tetun, Portuguese and even Arabic. And the documentary the Circle of Stones was screened at this event.

<http://www.suaimediaspace.org/2009/08/07/circle-of-stones/>

### **Travelling Friends Carry Stories of Activities in both Communities**

Prior to the Internet access being available in Suai the concept was that people in both communities could document events and activities or make 'texts' using any language and tools, (photographs being the most common) – **and friends traveling back and forth could act as couriers carrying the community 'conversation' with them**. These community based conversational moments then became the content for a new form of documentary of the friendship, when they were put up on the website.

In the case of the rocks – we showed the documentary in St Kilda Town Hall. Then, the documentary and photographs of the rocks and a video of the Port Phillip event were sent to Suai on portable media (DVD) where it could be copied, then later it was placed on the website. The documentary was appreciated by the Timorese and made its way to the U.S. with Timorese justice advocate Filomena dos Reis, (who wrote and directed the massacre re-enactment used in the film). Filomena used it on her speaking tour and in an unexpected turn of events used it in a presentation to U.S. Congress in the presence of Hilary Clinton and Condoleezza Rice. A surprising place for a piece of our friendship to travel to.

## Overcoming Distance and the Digital Divide

Subsequent work with the Friends of Suai and Ergilio (who became the co-ordinator of the Youth Centre in Suai), <http://www.suaimediaspace.org/youth/youth-centre/> led to the development of a youth media training group (YoMaTre). Irregular workshops were given and some young people now had reasonable access to the means of production.



Suai Youth Centre, Ergilio Vicente and the Youth Centre Mural



Classes of 2006, 2008 and 2009.

With a grant from Port Phillip Council Ergilio and I agreed to set up a website: [www.suaimediaspace.org](http://www.suaimediaspace.org). The pride felt for the website showed through when the URL was written into a mural on the side of the Youth Centre – see above. More information about the workshops can be read here: <http://www.suaimediaspace.org/youth/youth-media/workshops/>

## Timorese Authorship Increases and Conversation Widens to Diaspora

**Broadband access, more training and equipment came to the Youth Centre**, indirectly, (thanks to the International Centre for Journalism), because of this project, and so, in addition to the above website we set up a social network. <http://suaimediaspace.ning.com/>

This made uploading from Suai to the website very easy and Timorese began using it immediately without further training.



**The potential for community-to-community conversations increased dramatically** at this moment. The network has a membership of over 200 now though activity has declined. As members have migrated to Facebook and out of the ghetto it's been very satisfying. Only a few of those on the social network are from Port Phillip and they are quite passive in this space. The resources available to stimulate engagement in Port Phillip and Suai communities, or even promote it, were not available, for a range of reasons. But it is clear that engagement strategies are required. **What was noticeable was the joy of Timorese in the diaspora who found the site** as they connected up to those at home in Suai. Browsing the social network one can see plenty of examples of the exchanges between homeland Timorese and people in the Diaspora.

### **Homeland and the Diaspora: Muxing Music, Animations, History, Reportage & Traditional Culture all together in the Social Networks**

In 2008 when I started suai media space I began a steep learning curve that included experimenting with blog software for our website, YouTube, Facebook and later the social network and Twitter.

The **Suai Media Space Facebook page was attacked by racist youths** and was eventually removed after months of begging Facebook administrators to act. This has now been replaced by **'Hau Hadomi Suai' Group (I love Suai) set up by Malae Suai (foreigner Suai) who is studying in the Phillipines** and has been very active in our social network. Malae and others also hooked up on Skype as well as using the chat facility on Facebook and the social network.

<http://www.facebook.com/?ref=home#!/group.php?gid=391136308608>

Early experiments with YouTube also brought surprises. I filmed some Timorese **singing at Boite and uploaded their song 'Foin Sae Timor' (Timor Youth)** to YouTube. <http://www.suaimediaspace.org/2007/12/20/foin-sae-timor-timor-youth/>



It was immediately popular (in my terms, not mass terms), but the big surprise was that in one week a **Canadian Timorese IT worker who calls himself Musis Ramelau, had muxed it**. He ripped off the images of the musicians and replaced them with his animation that was a kind of **disco scene of animated stick musicians with neon drumsticks singing and playing the same song**.

I **discovered the musicians involved were unimpressed** and later Musis seems to have removed it from his YouTube channel. Fortunately I had ripped it and placed it on [suaimediaspace.org](http://www.suaimediaspace.org) and that is where you can see it now.

<http://www.suaimediaspace.org/2008/10/24/timorese-animation-dedicated-to-youth-of-suai/>

Later Musis sent a sweet romantic animation titled ‘theatro Em Suai por Jovem Suai’ – ‘Theatre of suai for the youth of Suai’

<http://www.suaimediaspace.org/2008/10/28/theatro-em-suai-theatre-of-suai/>

**The very first video uploaded to the social network by YoMaTre member Chamot was a comic mime piece in which he makes fun of the distances and cultural differences between us** - then two short videos of traditional dance and a range of other interesting work. The **videos and photographs of traditional culture attract happy and very positive attention from students and others living in the Diaspora**, and my guess from what I have observed, is they love connecting to home this way. I would add that the majority of music uploaded is Timorese but it’s also clear they are influenced by Indonesian and American music.

<http://suaimediaspace.ning.com/video/comic-1>

<http://suaimediaspace.ning.com/video/bidu-tradisional-beinahac>



**Kamenassa Dancers by Chamot**

<http://suaimediaspace.ning.com/video/video/listForContributor?screenName=25mrvkjlwj5fk>

Digital manipulation using on-line resources brought out the youths' sense of humour.



**Mojadi – Washington Post. Chamot's wife & baby. Chamot in Billboards**

## Conclusion

In Conclusion if you browse Suai media space website and social network and the videos and photographs authored by these young Timorese both at home and in the Diaspora you will get a **quite alternative view of Timorese identity and sense of place than you have ever seen in the Australian media**. They are enthusiastic, generous, very intelligent and creative.

If you notice the gender balance seems to exist in the classes but not in the texts. This has been a disappointing aspect of the project. It's not that the women are lacking in creativity, the answer lies in the usual reasons – in brief - young to marry, less access and more responsibilities at home. I am happy to say their work in the workshops was very good with one young woman being quite outstanding.

The conversation between the communities is perhaps more imaginary that real because it's difficult to pin down who sees what, when and where. It is difficult to measure what Timorese in the Diaspora and in Suai gain from it. I like to think it has made a difference and enhanced the friendship by providing a place and means to communicate. I am glad to provide the opportunity for others to discover more about the real face of Timorese people and their culture and the work ordinary Australians do to recompense for the violence caused to the Timorese people because of the policies of successive Australian governments in the past.