

Tribute to a Woman ... to a Timorese Freedom Fighter

by Ana Maria Ferreira

Lourdes Maria Assunção de Jesus Mascarenhas Alves was born in Hatolia - Ermera on August 15, 1956. She was the eldest daughter of Hermínio Marques Alves and Gilhelmina of Jesus Alves. She had ten brothers.

Merita Alves, you couldn't win the battle you've been fighting for two years. Cancer was stronger than the mistreatment, the violence, the torture which the Indonesians inflicted upon you during the long 24 years of fighting for "Ukun Rasik An".

Of the several times I spoke to you Merita, in the hospital bed and after the painful treatments—chemotherapy, radiotherapy and gamma knife, I saw that you hid tears behind your beautiful smile. You showed that everything was fine, even though you knew your world was coming down. As a Catholic and a believer, I want to believe that God knows what is best for you. He has the best plans and so, even if it costs me a lot to accept that you are no longer among us, I will let Him take care of you.

I had the pleasure of meeting Merita at the Fretilin General Conference, which took place in Sydney from 15 to 20 August 1988, although I had heard of her name several times. Estanislau da Silva, Fretilin Representative in Australia, often cited two names: Merita Alves and Lenita Jordão de Araújo. These were two Comrades, with whom Fretilin in Sydney maintained contact during the Resistance period. These contacts were not easy because they involved great risks, but the two "Biberes", defied the invader's strength and did everything to maintain the liaison of the Fretilin External Delegation with the Fight Command.

When I returned to Timor-Leste in 2000, both in Kuluhun and Metinaro, Fernando and I heard the stories of struggle and suffering of the Timorese people and especially of the Timorese women during the Indonesian occupation. Under a leafy Jackfruit tree, Merita spoke of the years of her involvement in the struggle for Independence. You said to us, "Maria Goreti suffered a lot at the hands of the Indonesians, cousins". The strength of a woman is in her character ... they are able to give their lives for all those they love."



For us Merita, you also fought and suffered for the Timorese Women ... by Timor-Leste. Never, at any time, have you been able to escape the torture and violence of those who worked in prison.

On 7 December 1975, at the time of the Indonesian invasion, Merita took refuge, together with her parents and brothers, in the woods of Lacló and from there, continued to fight, while Maria Goreti stayed in Dili.

In the bush, Merita received a letter from her friend and fighting partner, Maria Goreti. She told her that in prison she was tortured and raped by Indonesian soldiers, but she still asked everyone to continue fighting, "until we get the independence of our homeland".

It is not easy to remember torture. She told us that on 1 August 1976, the Central Committee of Fretilin, North Central Sector, began by organizing itself, choosing people to mobilize and raise the awareness of the population, especially the "Biberes". The first prominent position given by Fretilin to Women was deputy secretary of the People's Organization of Women Timor (OPMT), in the Lacló Zone. That position was handed over to Merita. She, together with the Secretary of OPMT, two assistants and a treasurer, worked

hard to implement the objectives, mission, vision and values of OPMT, which was to work for the Emancipation of Timor Women in all aspects.

Merita Alves believed that men and women are equal in rights and obligations. Women's rights or women's human rights are an offshoot of human rights and are based on the principle of integrity and dignity of human beings. As a Deputy Secretary of the OPMT, Merita worked to ensure that the Timorese woman had the same status, the same rights, the same opportunities, as the man. She always tried to raise awareness of domestic violence, barlaka, obscurantism, illiteracy, polygamy, prostitution.

In July 1978, Merita and her family were arrested by the ABRI in the Metinaro area. Merita was brought to Dili where she was detained by Indonesian forces and taken to the "Sang Tai Hoo" terror prison in Colmera. At the time, Maria Goreti was no longer in prison, however, she had to report to the authorities every day. One of the times that they met, Goreti turned to Merita and said, "They can invade my body, but they don't invade my heart... my soul." It was in this prison - Sang Tai Hoo, that she fell in love with Octávio Jordão de Araújo, one of the founders of Fretilin and Veteran of the Liberation Struggle, who had been imprisoned for some time.

On March 29, 1978, Merita and Octávio Jordão de Araújo were married in the Church of Motael. Dom Alberto Ricardo is the one who sealed the love of two young prisoners in love in wartime. Four children were born from this love: Octavio Almerindo, Maria do Céu (deceased), Ivo Cesar and Vera Laura.

In 1980, Octávio and Merita were once again captured by the Indonesian invaders. They were in Becora Prison until March 1984. When the Indonesians captured Xanana Gusmão (20th November, 1992), Octavio and Merita returned to S.G.I prison - Satuan Gabungan Inteligen - (Joint Intelligence Unit) and stayed there from November 27, 1992 to July 31, 1993.

When Merita left prison and defied the invaders, she created a clandestine network in the Kuluhun area, involving her own family: her husband, Octávio, her two brothers, São and Melkias Alves and her sister-in-law, Lenita Araújo, Inês Lay (widow) and João de Araújo (adopted brother). Their work consisted of arranging medicines, food, clothing and receiving guidance from the armed front to continue the Liberation Struggle.

There is much more that could be said of Merita... but the history is long, very long. A story of suffering.

Ohin, hau simu lian tatoli Irmã Merita Alves husik ona mundo ida nee, fila hikas ona ba Aman Maromak nia Kadunan Santo! Hakruuk ba Merita nia laran diak, monu ain ba Merita ninia determinação, hau nebe Merita sempre bolu AMANO, ho Ana no sobrinhos nain 4, ami hakneak hodi husu perdão ba sala hotu nebe ami halo hodi hakaneak irmã MERITA nia fuan durante tempo hirak nebe ita hamutuk!
Descanse em Paz irmã e companheira MERITA ALVES!



Merita ... (like her husband), suffered horrors ... was tortured at the hands of the Indonesians but Merita was a Woman (like her companions Biberes), who climbed the mountain of life, removing stones and planting flowers. Although the "war has no woman's face" (Svetlana Alexievich), I believe that "there is no force greater than the strength of a determined woman" as Merita Alves was.

Merita Alves was in Malaysia, in treatment. When the doctors told her that they could no longer do anything else and that it was best to return home to be with her husband and children, she replied: "I am ready to return ... since you deplete all the resources. We all want to be cured but if God wants other ways, even having to interrupt the treatment ... it is best to follow the path that God has chosen ... No one was born to live forever, was it? God gives no alternatives and we cannot go beyond what He wants."

Merita died on Monday, May 24, 2021 at her residence in Dili, surrounded by her family. Timor-Leste has lost one of its heroines, the person who fought for the rights and values of the Timorese Woman. Fretilin has undoubtedly lost one of its senior staff ... a loyal comrade and extremely dedicated to the party.

Rest in Peace, Merita, and "obrigada wain" for your sacrifice, for your love for Timor-Leste and its People.