

PORTUGUESE OR NOT PORTUGUESE: THE QUESTION BETWEEN AMÍLCAR CABRAL AND PAULO FREIRE AND ITS LESSONS FOR THE TIMORESE BROTHERS

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Abstract

This study analyses Paulo Freire's literacy program in Portuguese-speaking African countries, particularly with regard to the choice of the language of instruction. Its central focus is the linguistic dilemma arising from the differing positions of Amílcar Cabral and Paulo Freire concerning literacy education in Portuguese within the African Countries of Portuguese Official Language (PALOP). For political reasons, Cabral regarded the Portuguese language as a "gift" and as a unifying force among diverse ethnic and linguistic groups, a position that Freire interpreted as a constraint on his educational intervention. Freire advocated literacy instruction in Creole, arguing that the exclusive use of Portuguese reproduced the elitist character of the educational system, since it was a language detached from the social practices of the people. Following Bowen's (2009) qualitative approach to documentary analysis, which involves skimming, reading, and interpretation, this article examines the sole point of disagreement between Cabral's thought and Freire's literacy program: the use of the colonizer's language in emancipatory education and the implications of this debate for language policy in Timor-Leste. By comparing this experience with the latter case of Timor-Leste's independence, where Tetum was granted co-official status and employed in literacy programs, the article highlights a more open language policy, albeit one marked by new dilemmas of its own.

Keywords

Amílcar Cabral; Paulo Freire; popular literacy campaign; language of instruction; Portuguese language in former colonies.

Resumo

Este estudo analisa o programa de alfabetização de Paulo Freire nos países africanos de língua portuguesa, com particular atenção à escolha da língua de instrução. O seu foco central reside



no dilema linguístico decorrente das posições divergentes de Amílcar Cabral e Paulo Freire relativamente à alfabetização em português nos Países Africanos de Língua Oficial Portuguesa (PALOP). Por razões políticas, Cabral considerava a língua portuguesa uma “dádiva” e um elemento de unificação entre os diversos grupos étnicos e linguísticos, posição que Freire interpretava como um condicionamento da sua intervenção educativa. Freire defendia a alfabetização em crioulo, argumentando que a utilização exclusiva do português reproduzia o caráter elitista do sistema educativo, uma vez que se tratava de uma língua dissociada das práticas sociais e culturais das populações. Seguindo a abordagem qualitativa de análise documental proposta por Bowen (2009), baseada nas etapas de exame preliminar, leitura aprofundada e interpretação, este artigo analisa o único ponto de divergência entre o pensamento de Cabral e o programa de alfabetização de Freire: o uso da língua do colonizador na educação emancipatória e as implicações deste debate para as políticas linguísticas em Timor-Leste. Ao comparar essa experiência com o caso posterior da independência timorense, em que o tétum adquiriu estatuto de língua cooficial e foi utilizado em programas de alfabetização, o artigo evidencia uma política linguística mais aberta e inclusiva, embora igualmente marcada por novos dilemas e desafios.

Palavras-chave

Amílcar Cabral; Paulo Freire; campanha de alfabetização popular; língua de instrução; língua portuguesa nas ex-colónias.

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Introduction

Amílcar Cabral's writings undeniably influenced Paulo Freire's concepts of education for liberation. Evidence of this influence can be found in Freire's dedication of his book *Letters to Guinea-Bissau* to Cabral, whom he describes as an "educator educating his people." According to Freire (1985), it is difficult to think about the liberation movements of the Portuguese-colonized African countries without referring to Amílcar Cabral. The two never met in person due to Cabral's premature death in 1973, but his works were studied extensively by Freire when, in 1975, he was invited to organize an adult literacy project in Guinea-Bissau. In this regard, "Freire was able to observe that Cabral was not merely theory, but rather a great deal of practice - a practice that transformed the lives of his people, a liberating practice" (Silva & Cassiani, 2022, p. 3). According to Freire's own testimony, it was possible to verify the coherence between Cabral's writings and liberatory concepts and the accounts of those who had fought alongside him. As Freire states: "the reading of Amílcar, the personality of Amílcar as a great revolutionary, was something that fascinated me then and continues to fascinate me completely today" (Freire, 1985, p. 3). Cabral argued that education was an instrument of resistance and of the re-Africanization of colonized peoples. However, local culture, in his view, "must develop on a scientific basis; it must be scientific, that is, people should not believe in imaginary things" (Cabral, 1978, p. 141, cited in Silva & Cassiani, 2022, p. 6). For this reason, the establishment of schools in the rural interior of Guinea was one of the concrete actions of the liberation program.

The educational system implemented by the PAIGC in the liberated zones sought to recover what was most relevant in the experience of traditional Guinean society. The informality and spontaneity of traditional educational practices were revalued, as was the use of the experience of elders. Given the severe material constraints faced by the

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² Acknowledgment - The content of this study was originally written entirely by the author in Portuguese. Artificial intelligence tools were used exclusively to support the translation process and to enhance the academic language, style, and readability of the English version. The intellectual content, arguments, analysis, and conclusions presented in this work remain solely the responsibility of the author.



movement, efforts were made, whenever possible, to link learning to productive activities associated with community tasks. [...] Education contributed significantly to the emergence of a genuinely national culture rooted in the positive aspects of the various traditional cultures, while also incorporating, and adapting to the country's needs, the achievements of universal scientific culture. (Cá, 2005, pp. 93–94)

This education was, however, essentially practical, focusing on “themes related to work, health, and hygiene,” as well as learning “how to make better use of seeds and fertilizers” or “how to monitor soil and water conditions in order to plan the sale of products”. The objective was not formal literacy in itself, but rather a feasible and useful literacy through which “it would be possible to establish, through the creative and deliberative capacity of the people, an active influence of the community on the social environment, which signifies cultural action” (Pereira & Vittoria, 2012, p. 303).

The centrality of educational programs in Cabral’s struggle led Freire to describe him as a “Pedagogue of the Revolution” (Silva & Cassiani, 2022, p. 9). Nevertheless, Cabral’s revolutionary character did not diminish his diplomatic abilities. According to Pereira and Vittoria (2012), he maintained balanced relations with both the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, receiving honorary degrees from universities in both superpowers almost simultaneously. Even with regard to the Portuguese colonizers, Cabral stated:

We have never confused “Portuguese colonialism” with the “people of Portugal,” and we have done everything within our possibilities to preserve, despite the crimes committed by the Portuguese colonialists, the prospects for cooperation, friendship, solidarity, and effective collaboration with the Portuguese people, on the basis of independence, equality of rights, and reciprocity of benefits, whether for the progress of our land or for the progress of the Portuguese people. (Cabral, 1974a, p. 18, cited in Pereira & Vittoria, 2012, p. 299)

In an interview, one of Freire’s sons stated that his father’s ideas were largely aligned with Cabral’s political and revolutionary proposals (Pereira & Vittoria, 2012, p. 302). The purpose of this article, however, is to examine the sole point of disagreement between Cabral’s thought and Freire’s literacy program: the use of the colonizer’s language in emancipatory education, as the resistance of African political leaders and of the educators themselves to the use of Creole led Freire to acknowledge the political limitations of his intervention. This is a documentary study (Quivy & Campenhoudt, 2008; Bowen, 2009). According to Bowen:

Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material. Like other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009, p. 27).

According to the author, documentary analysis is primarily employed in “qualitative case studies—intensive studies producing rich descriptions of a single phenomenon, event,



organization, or program" (Bowen, 2009, 29). This methodology is consistent with the research objective, as the study seeks to analyze the disagreement between Cabral and Freire regarding language policy. Accordingly, we examined Freire's two books - *A Importância do Ato de Ler* (Freire, 2011) e *Alfabetização: Leitura do Mundo, Leitura da Palavra* (Freire & Macedo, 2011), in which he argues in favor of the use of Creole as the language of instruction and explains how this divergence of opinion was interpreted by political leaders in the Portuguese-speaking African countries (PALOP) where he worked. It is important to emphasize that Cabral and Freire never met in person nor engaged in any direct written exchange concerning these language policies. For this reason, the documentary analysis focuses exclusively on Freire's writings and based on Freire's own testimony as recorded in his published works. For this reason, we frequently cite Freire's direct statements concerning the principal arguments he advanced against the use of the Portuguese language as the medium of instruction in literacy campaigns. According to Bowen "document analysis involves skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation. This iterative process combines elements of content analysis and thematic analysis" (Bowen, 2009, p.32). The analytical process adopted in this study followed this sequence to interpret the documentary evidence on language policy and the language of instruction in former Portuguese colonies. The resulting interpretation was subsequently applied to the case of Timor-Leste to discuss the applicability of these debates to the post-independence educational Timorese context.

Literacy and the Language of Instruction

The discussion on the maintenance of the colonial language after the independence of formerly colonized countries has been a recurring theme in the literature. Regarding African countries, Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas (1994, p. 335) argue that "Language policy is of vital importance for the political stability and legitimacy of the state." However, "the majority of Africans are governed in a language that they do not understand, but few African states have given serious attention to language policy." The authors further argue that the prevailing situation in these countries is one of declaration without implementation. In other words, decolonization discourses are not accompanied by political actions that effectively implement them.

Makoni, Severo, and Abdelhay (2023) have recently revisited this issue, arguing that although the "African Revolution gathered the deep struggles of African peoples for geopolitical, intellectual, and cultural freedom and autonomy, which meant that African institutions, identities, languages, and intellectual production were under (re)construction and legitimation," the need for such legitimation has not been fully addressed. They further observe that the work of revolutionary leaders such as "Frantz Fanon (African diaspora and Algeria), Amílcar Cabral (Cabo Verde and Guinea-Bissau), Léopold Senghor (Senegal), Samora Machel (Mozambique), and Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana)" is rarely cited in Western academic discussions on language policy. According to these authors, "The African language issue during the emergence of African nations was addressed by non-Africans as a problem to be solved and fixed, following a non-African perspective of society, nation, and politics" (Makoni, Severo, & Abdelhay, 2023,



p. 485). They therefore discuss the persistence of the perspective of “language problems” faced by “developing” nations, particularly in Africa and Asia, including within international organizations established to protect cultures and languages, such as UNESCO. This “monoglot ideology of one language–one nation ... contributed to shape a school literacy perspective about Africa, and vice versa, turning Africa and illiteracy into synonyms,” with the consequence that “multilingual experiences are reduced to ideas of weakness and lackness” (p. 486). For this reason, Makoni, Severo, and Abdelhay conclude that “postcolonial approaches to LPP should consider the problems connected to the management of multilingualism by postcolonial elites or the ways in which former colonial powers have used cultural aspects of language to legitimize continued influence (p. 487).”

It is precisely for this reason that Freire's voice is particularly significant for studies on the decolonization of education, since as early as the 1970s he advocated the use of national languages within formal education as a necessary condition for the completion of the struggle for independence. Likewise, he argued for the immediate valorization of indigenous languages from a perspective of linguistic equality, rejecting the continued hierarchical ordering of languages established under colonial rule. What is particularly intriguing in this article, however, is that Amílcar Cabral's own discourse of national liberation was subsequently invoked by his political successors to justify the maintenance of the colonial language as the only legitimate language of education.

Timorese students in Portugal during the 1970s had access to the revolutionary ideas of Amílcar Cabral. However, since the discussion proposed here concerns the language used in decolonial education, this article takes Paulo Freire's theory and method as its primary framework. His influence likewise extends to Timor-Leste (Urban & Santiago, 2022). One of the major contributions that Freire's writings can offer to the Timorese context lies in his self-assessments of the literacy experiences he conducted and the theories he put into practice in African countries that were former Portuguese colonies.

According to Fernandes (1998) and Saul (1998) these experiences were largely limited to adult literacy and non-formal education: cultural action, cultural animation, popular education, adult education, and informal education. The guiding principle of these programs was that “educational work began within popular culture and sought to innovate pathways of access to scientific and technical knowledge that did not originate from popular culture” (Fernandes, 1998, p. 127), much as Cabral had previously envisioned. Popular culture occupies a central place in Paulo Freire's method, and “the school should also be a centre for the dissemination of popular culture, not in order to consume it, but to recreate it,” as Saul (1998, p. 157) explains. In Freire (2011) adult literacy is understood as “the critical and creative participation of the people in the process of reinventing their society,” once freed from prolonged colonial domination. Political education, therefore, is the means through which responsibility for the future is placed in the hands of the people themselves. As Freire argues, it is necessary that: “adult literacy and post-literacy programs, at the service of national reconstruction, contribute to enabling the people, increasingly taking their history into their own hands, to remake themselves in the making of History” (Freire, 2011, p. 53). Thus, every literacy program implemented in newly independent countries was conceived not merely as a method for reading words but also for reading the world and the people's history. Adult



literacy, in Freire's view, does not simply teach "ba-be-bi-bo-bu." Nevertheless, Freire was frequently questioned about the modest results of his literacy programs outside Brazil—his own social and cultural context. For this reason, he wrote extensively about his experiences in African countries:

Obviously, not everything is smooth sailing in the development of work such as this in a poor, small country, recently liberated from the colonial yoke, where the people and their leadership must confront countless difficulties (...) among them the shortage of national cadres, which are still quantitatively insufficient for the tasks demanded by national reconstruction. The scarcity of personnel and material resources, necessarily reflected in the field of adult literacy, inevitably constituted an obstacle not only to its planning but also to its implementation. (Freire, 2011, p. 59)

The author does not clarify in his writings what human resources were actually available to implement these programs. What becomes evident from his discussion of the literacy manuals and their use is that there was no intention of producing "intellectuals" through such methods. However, he does not describe who the cultural animators were, what level of formal education they possessed, or the extent of their proficiency in the language of instruction. In our interpretation, the absence of such descriptions may indicate that Freire believed not only that any adult was capable of learning, but also that any adult could become a literacy instructor, provided they had developed a critical political consciousness regarding their social role. In our view, this constitutes a significant gap in his method and deserves further discussion, particularly because a similar issue can be observed in Timor-Leste.

Another reality Freire encountered in his role as coordinator of literacy programs in African countries was the predominance of oral language throughout traditional society. On this matter, he states:

If nowhere, is it possible to write without practicing writing, then in a predominantly oral memory culture such as that of São Tomé, a literacy program must, on the one hand, while respecting the culture as it exists at a given moment, encourage learners' oral expression through debate, storytelling, and the analysis of events; on the other hand, it must challenge them to begin writing as well. Reading and writing are inseparable moments of the same process - the process of understanding and mastering language and linguistic expression (Freire, 2011, p. 62).

This is another important characteristic of the *Popular Education Notebooks*, in our observation: language teaching is always practical, with very little grammatical exposition and even less use of metalinguistic terminology to explain the few structural aspects presented in the manuals. The situation observed in teacher training programs and schools in Timor-Leste is precisely the opposite. Portuguese language teaching is often reduced to lengthy and monotonous grammatical explanations, while literacy instruction involves very little reading and even less writing (Soares, 2010, p. 83; Santos, 2013, p. 38). Timorese teachers themselves would need to become genuinely "literate" in Portuguese in order to work effectively within the educational system, and such literacy



certainly cannot consist merely of the uncritical repetition of grammatical rules (Rosário, 2025).

Several decades after his experiences in Africa, when Freire revisited the weaknesses of these literacy programs and manuals, in the books analysed in this paper, he attributed their limited success largely to the issue of the language of instruction. This discussion is of particular interest to the present article. In an interview with Macedo, Freire reflected at length on this problem in the former Portuguese colonies of Africa:

Guinea-Bissau fulfilled the first basic condition necessary for the success of a literacy campaign: the revolutionary transformation of society (...) However, Guinea-Bissau did not meet the second condition because of its linguistic diversity. The country has approximately thirty distinct languages and dialects spoken by different ethnic groups. In addition, it has Creole, which functions as a lingua franca. Creole gives Guinea-Bissau, Cabo Verde, and São Tomé a tremendous advantage over Angola and Mozambique, for example. Creole, a linguistic creation that combines African languages with Portuguese, developed gradually in Guinea-Bissau (...) Creole is as beautiful, rich, and viable as Portuguese. No linguistic expression or language is born fully developed. (...) One cannot simply decree the inviability of such a development. And that is more or less what I told the education commission (...) By a strange coincidence, the day after I made those remarks, *No Pintcha* published the only text by Amílcar Cabral with which I disagree. In that text he stated that the most beautiful gift the Portuguese had left to the people of Guinea-Bissau was the Portuguese language. (In fact, I later learned that there were political reasons behind Cabral's statement. He was attempting to use Portuguese as a unifying force to ease tensions among rival linguistic and ethnic groups in Guinea-Bissau.) I read that text by Cabral as if it were a message addressed directly to me: 'My comrade Paulo Freire, we like you very much, but do not interfere in this language issue in our country. Amílcar Cabral himself said that the Portuguese language was a beautiful gift from the colonizers.' (...) Eventually, we were able to bring to Guinea-Bissau two linguists (...) The Belgian was a specialist in Creole languages; the African specialist in African languages. (...) I then wrote a letter to Mário Cabral in which I reiterated the impossibility of continuing literacy work in Portuguese. In that letter, I also analysed the consequences of insisting on Portuguese as the sole vehicle of education. One consequence, for example, is that as long as Portuguese functions as the official language, it will also have to assume the role of the national languages (...) I argued that the exclusive use of Portuguese would function as a superstructure that would intensify class divisions, and this in a society that was supposedly recreating itself through the abolition of social classes. Continuing to use Portuguese in Guinea-Bissau as the mediating force in the education of the youth and continuing the practice of selecting students on the basis of their spoken and written knowledge of Portuguese, would ensure that only the children of the elite would be able to advance educationally, thereby reproducing a dominant elitist class. The people of Guinea-Bissau would once again find themselves excluded from the educational system and from the higher economic and political ranks. (Freire & Macedo, 2011, pp. 126–127)

Freire insisted that the major problem affecting the literacy programs he conducted in African countries was the inadequacy of the language of instruction. Repeatedly, he



argued in favour of literacy in Creole in Guinea-Bissau, Cabo Verde, and São Tomé, but encountered similar resistance from political leaders in all three countries:

The colonizers spent centuries attempting to impose their language. They did so by decree, creating the impression that the national languages were naturally inferior and amounted to nothing more than tribal dialects. Creole was likewise viewed as a mixed and corrupted jargon and therefore could not be considered a legitimate language. This profile was constructed by the colonizers (only those who hold power can define the profile of others) and imposed upon the people of Guinea-Bissau; and it was never repudiated, not even during the war of liberation (Freire & Macedo, 2011, p. 128).

The debate concerning the viability of Portuguese as a vehicle for literacy in Cabo Verde is confined to the technical question of whether Cabo Verdean Creole constitutes a valid rule-governed system. I believe that the issue must be posed in infinitely more political terms. We need to question the resistance to literacy in Creole based on claims that Creole lacks a standardized orthography. Excuses of this kind are used to justify the current policy of Portuguese as the sole medium of instruction. One must ask why Portuguese-speaking Cabo Verdeans rely on the common argument that Portuguese possesses international status and therefore guarantees upward mobility for educated Cabo Verdeans. Such a position, moreover, implies the presumed superiority of the Portuguese language. The sad reality is that although Portuguese may provide access to certain positions of political and economic power for the upper strata of Cabo Verdean society, it keeps the majority of the people behind - those who cannot learn Portuguese well enough to attain the level of literacy necessary for social, political, and economic advancement. In fact, continuing to use the colonizer's language as the sole medium of instruction means continuing to support the manipulative strategies that sustain cultural domination. Thus, what lies hidden beneath the technical debate concerning the language of instruction in Cabo Verde is resistance to re-Africanization or, perhaps, a subtle refusal on the part of assimilated Cabo Verdeans to "commit class suicide." (Freire & Macedo, 2011, pp. 135-136)

As an example of national leaders' resistance to the official use of Creole, Freire recounts the post-independence remarks of a Cabo Verdean authority who had participated in the liberation struggle. When asked which language he used at work, he replied: "Portuguese, of course. It is the only way to keep my subordinates in their place. If I speak Cabo Verdean, they do not respect me" (Freire & Macedo, 2011, p. 196).

Freire further reports that debates concerning the language of instruction were continuous among educators, and that the teaching profession itself expressed similar reservations about the use of Creole as the instructional language within the educational system. These educators repeatedly employed "the lack of orthographic standardization in African languages as an argument to justify their current policy of using Portuguese as the sole medium for teaching reading. The question they raise concerns which dialect such an orthography should be based upon" (Freire & Macedo, 2011, p. 183). Freire countered this argument by drawing upon linguistic theory, according to which all languages constitute valid rule-governed systems, including African tribal languages. In



his view, the real issue was that these languages continued to occupy a stigmatized and subordinate position in relation to Portuguese.

However, it is not our intention to dismiss Freire's extensive arguments in favour of literacy in Creole and its evident advantages. In his own defence, Freire published a lengthy letter addressed to Mário Cabral, the Minister of Education of Guinea-Bissau during the period in which Freire coordinated adult literacy programs and culture circles. The purpose of publishing this correspondence years later was to insist that the so-called failure of the project in Guinea-Bissau "was not due to the 'Freire method.' This failure demonstrated with complete clarity the impracticability of using Portuguese as the sole vehicle of instruction in literacy campaigns. This is a fundamental point" (Freire & Macedo, 2011, p. 132). Nevertheless, in the same letter, Freire acknowledges the difficulty of implementing what he considered the appropriate course of action and demonstrates an understanding of the sensitive circumstances facing education in post-independence Guinea-Bissau. As he states: "We do not mean by this that the Party and the government should have suspended all systematic educational activities in the country until a written form of Creole became available. That would be so absurd that it is not even worth considering". (Freire & Macedo, 2011, p. 251). Accordingly, he concluded his letter with the following recommendations:

While this process of standardizing Creole was underway, we would limit literacy in Portuguese, within the framework of cultural action, to: 1. The area of Bissau, where the population, while fully mastering Creole, is also familiar with Portuguese. There, above all, literacy in Portuguese would take place in workplaces, where reading and writing in that language might represent something important both for learners and for the effort of national reconstruction; 2. Certain rural areas, whenever and if socio-economic development programs require workers to acquire technical skills that, in turn, demand reading and writing in Portuguese. In this case, if Creole is not spoken fluently, as it is in Bissau, the methodological approach to be adopted in the teaching of Portuguese would still need to be determined (Freire & Macedo, 2011, p. 252).

When Freire proposes differentiated treatment and differentiated opportunities for different regions of Guinea-Bissau, he is, to some extent, reinforcing existing social and educational inequalities. This is precisely the principal argument advanced by Timorese leaders who oppose multilingual literacy policies. Their concern is that inequalities in access to and mastery of the official languages may become entrenched once the use of mother tongues in the classroom is legalized and extended into higher levels of education (Indart, 2017). This concern is not without foundation. Research based on interviews and classroom observations has shown that teachers frequently justify the continued use of a particular instructional language by arguing that it is the only language through which students can understand their explanations. As a result, the gradual introduction of the official languages is often avoided in everyday educational practice (Cali, 2015, p. 37).

At the same time, Freire's letter to Mário Cabral reveals a fundamental social factor that also hinders the acquisition of Portuguese in Timor-Leste: Portuguese is not part of the



social practice of the popular masses because it is absent from virtually every level of that practice. Equally significant is Freire's recognition that external intervention in the decisions of an independent nation must have limits. Such interventions should remain at the level of suggestions rather than impositions. Thus, we argue, that two issues are involved in the language policies of independent yet formerly colonized nations. The first concerns the interests of liberation leaders themselves in maintaining political authority and demonstrating their superiority as leaders, among other means through the use of the official language. The second concerns external intervention - whether by Freire in Guinea-Bissau or by organizations such as UNICEF or UNESCO in Timor-Leste - which must necessarily respect the autonomy of the country's decisions, even when those decisions are disputed. In his own testimony, Freire states: "What I could not do in Guinea-Bissau was go beyond the political limitations of the moment. As a foreigner, I could not impose my proposals upon the reality of Guinea-Bissau and upon the needs as perceived by its political leaders" (Freire & Macedo, 2011, p. 116). As an example, Freire refers to the disagreement regarding the language to be used in literacy programs, since "the leadership considered it politically advantageous to adopt Portuguese as the principal vehicle of the literacy campaign" (Freire & Macedo, 2011, p. 116).

In Western contexts, Freire consistently argued that mastery of the standard language by socially marginalized or stigmatized groups constitutes a powerful and indispensable instrument of empowerment. The fact that students' linguistic varieties should be respected and valued does not imply that they do not need to learn to "fight with the weapons of the other". Students should not be confined "to their own local language". Genuine empowerment, in Freire's view, "must also be a means of enabling students to examine and selectively appropriate those aspects of the dominant culture that will provide them with the basis for defining and transforming the broader social order, rather than simply serving it". For this reason, "educators must understand the value of mastering the dominant standard language of the wider society" (Freire & Macedo, 2011, p. 186).

The argument above reveals another dimension of Freire's position regarding the maintenance of Portuguese in the former colonies. Although he opposed the use of the colonial language as the primary medium of literacy instruction, he never advocated its complete elimination as a language of education. On the contrary, he argued that positive elements of other cultures should not be ignored in the pursuit of development. As he explains: "In speaking of the impossibility of exporting practices, I am not denying the validity of foreign practices. Nor am I denying the need for exchange. What I am saying is that such practices must be reinvented" (Freire & Macedo, 2011, p. 157). Once again referring to the African context, he observes:

It would be very unwise for the people of Cabo Verde, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé, and other countries to sever all ties with the Portuguese language simply because it is the language of the colonizer. To renounce entirely the positive aspects of Portuguese culture (for example, refusing to read Portuguese authors) makes no sense whatsoever. In the process of re-establishing relations with these countries, the former colonizers should help demonstrate the benefits that the Portuguese language can offer. The question that must be asked is how to activate and institutionalize the use



of indigenous African languages so that they can gradually replace the language of the colonizers in spheres such as the economy, politics, and finance (Freire & Macedo, 2011, p. 214).

In the two books here analysed, Freire also acknowledges that it would be impossible to translate literary works and official documents into Creole “overnight,” since such an undertaking would require not only extensive linguistic planning but also economic resources that did not exist. The creolization of the former colonies, therefore, would need to proceed gradually within the educational system so that future generations might “feel free to express themselves in their national language, without fear and without experiencing any elitist constraints” (Freire & Macedo, 2011, pp. 214–215). Freire further recognizes the political and identity-related challenges involved. It is unlikely that the selection of a local language as the language of schooling would not generate “a rupture among different ethnic groups who may feel deprived of their linguistic rights. This could even endanger the revolutionary process itself” (Freire & Macedo, 2011, p. 215), especially in countries where no unifying Creole language exists.

Lessons From Cabral and Freire for Timor-Leste

Having described the dynamics surrounding the choice of literacy languages in Africa, we can now compare them with the process of reintroducing Portuguese in Timor-Leste after independence. It should be emphasized that some of Timor’s key political figures lived in the African countries discussed by Freire during the very years in which those companion nations were confronting linguistic challenges similar to those currently faced by Timorese society. For this reason, we can identify both parallels and lessons learned through observation in the Timorese decision-making process. Timor-Leste took care not to repeat certain mistakes made by fellow nations engaged in similar struggles.

Upon achieving independence, the country granted co-official status to Tetum in the Constitution without any prejudice regarding its alleged impurity or corruption as a language. Only as a language of technical instruction is Tetum still considered not fully developed, and for this reason its lexical expansion continues to be supported by Portuguese. As early as 2001, the National Institute of Linguistics was established to undertake lexical development, structural description, and the standardization of Tetum so that it could immediately be used as the language of literacy instruction in schools. These contextual differences in comparison with the African countries demonstrate that Timor-Leste’s language policy is considerably more open and less discriminatory, at least at the level of official policy. Language policy for literacy since 2000 has been bilingual, without prejudice to Tetum. The issue currently raised by linguists concerns competition between Tetum and the mother tongues rather than between Tetum and Portuguese. When successive national censuses are examined, it becomes apparent that the Timorese “Creole” is the language threatening other indigenous languages through its rapid acquisition, substitution, and lexical expansion (fuelled by Portuguese) even in rural areas. While the officialization of a “Creole” language is important for the construction of a unified national identity, it is naïve to assume that internal competition among



indigenous languages for status either does not exist or is unimportant for the new social and linguistic order emerging in the country.

Freire was unable to perceive this context in such depth because he did not reside permanently in the countries where he coordinated literacy programs. Rather, he made periodic visits for debates, the training of cultural animators, and the preparation of literacy materials, while actually residing in Geneva and conducting much of his work from a distance. Likewise, concerns regarding the choice of a particular dialect or variety as the basis for orthographic standardization should not be minimized. Beyond its technical dimensions, this is undoubtedly a political decision that privileges one variety over others. This is the case, for example, with the Mambae language in Timor-Leste. Because it is spoken as a mother tongue across several mountainous and geographically isolated regions, it has developed distinct varieties (Carneiro, 2010; Fogaça, 2017). Standardizing only one of these varieties for literacy purposes would constitute an act no less imposing than adopting Tetum or Portuguese as the language of instruction. A political decision that fails to take such issues seriously would certainly not resolve the social, ethnic, and linguistic tensions characteristic of multilingual nations; it would merely relocate a national problem to the local level, where it would be less visible. The question that must be considered is the extent to which ethnolinguistic groups should be subdivided so that all may enjoy the same right to education in their own language or linguistic variety, while at the same time avoiding the fragmentation of the educational system into a multitude of linguistic microsystems in the effort to guarantee equal rights to all groups. Even Tetum - the national unifying language and a point of broad consensus across Timorese political and educational circles - remains surrounded by dilemmas concerning standardization. Portuguese was also granted official status in part to provide lexical and structural support to Tetum. Evidence demonstrates that Indonesian has been replaced within society primarily by Tetum rather than by Portuguese, including at higher levels of education (Almeida & Indart, 2023).

Freire believed in the development of the "Creole" language as the language of education not only for literacy but also for technical and scientific instruction. He argued that: "The principal issue is to enable people to create and develop their own Creole. Creole can only be systematized by the people who speak it and by no one else" (Freire & Macedo, 2011, p. 219). However, in practical contexts, such developments require time and cannot be scheduled or accelerated at will, since linguistic evolution is a natural process. For this reason, the officialization of a "Creole" language and its systematic use in education are particularly complex during the first years or even decades of independence. The Timorese context also differs from the African experience with respect to the use of language as an instrument of liberation. Unlike the African countries discussed by Freire, Timor-Leste experienced a new invasion shortly after its Declaration of Independence. There was a moment in 1974, while still under Portuguese colonial rule, when literacy campaigns aimed at the masses were envisioned exclusively in Tetum (Mendes, 2005, p. 138). Subsequently, however, when Portuguese became a symbolic weapon in the struggle against Indonesian occupation, it acquired an entirely new significance for national liberation, functioning in support of the liberation movement rather than as an obstacle to it.



However, Freire insists that linguistic oppression through the colonial language must be repudiated if the struggle for liberation is to be complete. Otherwise, the liberation leaders themselves would merely be reproducing the colonizer's dominant ideology. After all, these leaders were educated by the colonizer and are often the only members of society who are fully fluent in Portuguese. Consequently, it is the children of this "liberating" elite who alone perform well in examinations and obtain high grades. "They are the only ones who gain access to science and technology. Thus, the majority of children, the sons and daughters of peasants, will remain excluded. Tomorrow, the new generation in power will be composed only of the sons and daughters of those families who are in power today". (Freire & Macedo, 2011, p. 216) The issue, however, is that the liberation movements in the territories colonized by Portugal did not primarily struggle against traditional social stratification; rather, they fought against foreign colonial domination. The fact that they employed Marxist discourse and methodology does not necessarily make them socialist once in power, at least not in terms of guaranteeing equality among all citizens. Upon returning to their original cultures, these societies often recovered communal traditions, but not necessarily communist principles. Social classes were not abolished; indeed, their divisions frequently became even more visible among the native population once the colonizer withdrew.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that there exists an attachment among the Timorese ruling class to its own interests through the Portuguese language. Evidence of this can be seen in the fact that the children of the elite attend the Portuguese School in Dili, where one of the admission criteria is the use of Portuguese in the home environment. This requirement effectively restricts access to European Portuguese and to the Portuguese curriculum to the elite. However, the ruling class's rejection of literacy in mother tongues is presented not as a denial of the rights of subordinate groups, but rather as a defence of those rights. Their argument is that children from rural areas would be further marginalized and once again excluded from access to the official languages if they were educated exclusively in their own local languages. Freire, however, remained convinced that the language of the colonizer could not serve as the primary medium for literacy because it was not part of learners' reading of the world. He repeatedly reaffirmed this conviction. In his view, "the challenging task of reappropriating one's own culture and history cannot be accomplished through the language that denied one's reality and sought to eradicate one's own means of communication". (Freire & Macedo, 2011, p. 133). To some extent, independent Timor-Leste sought complete emancipation and liberation through detachment from the language of oppression. Yet that language was no longer Portuguese; it was Indonesian. For this reason, schooling in Indonesian was not maintained after independence. For the Timorese elite, it made little sense to fight against Indonesian domination and subsequently continue using Indonesian as an official language. Such a situation would have represented only a partial independence. Moreover, Portuguese colonialism in Timor-Leste was initially more religious and commercial than political and military, and its influence on Timorese culture and identity was gradual and deeply intertwined with local realities. After four centuries, it became impossible to reconstruct a "pure" identity without denying the country's own history. Furthermore, after Portuguese was employed as a language of resistance against Indonesian occupation, memories of Portuguese colonial oppression receded, making it



even more difficult to dismiss Portuguese as part of Timor-Leste's contemporary linguistic identity. Even negative historical legacies of colonialism, such as the disappearance of cultures and languages, are irreversible realities. In the lives of individuals as well as nations, ideal situations do not exist; only concrete realities do. Progress can only be built from those realities. Nevertheless, the construction of a new post-independence identity remains both desirable and necessary, and such an identity inevitably incorporates both indigenous and foreign elements. It is precisely this search for a new identity that is currently underway in Timor-Leste.

Despite Freire's reluctance to employ the colonizer's language in critical education, he himself acknowledged that such a language may remain indispensable for gradual and balanced social transformation. An abrupt break with a linguistic system that has long been used in education carries negative consequences, even when that system is considered undesirable. Both the African Creoles and Tetum have developed in close relationship with Portuguese, and the very survival of these vehicular languages depends upon linguistic partnership and borrowing - not only lexical but also syntactic and semantic—from external languages. The other indigenous languages are generally unable to provide such support at more technical levels of communication. Another difficulty identified by Freire concerns financial and functional constraints. The development of a substantial body of literature and educational materials, as well as the standardization process for either Creole or indigenous languages, requires considerable time and financial investment—resources often unavailable to newly independent countries. Finally, Freire recognizes that the danger of national fragmentation during processes of linguistic valorisation is real. While this risk may be reduced in countries possessing a widely shared Creole language, it nevertheless remains present.

Freire also raises questions concerning the identity implications of the continued use of Portuguese as a language of struggle and development after liberation. According to him, "colonized peoples must preserve their native language. And the more elaborated they make their language, the better, because the colonizer will not understand it, and thus they will be able to use their language to defend themselves against the colonizer" (Freire & Macedo, 2011, pp. 219–220). Freire overlooks, however, the fact that a Creole language, despite being national in character, may not be the mother tongue of many citizens—as is the case with Tetum, which is not the primary language spoken in most Timorese households. Using it in literacy education may address questions of national identity, but it does not necessarily resolve the pedagogical concerns that Freire himself considered so important. This constitutes the central dilemma of literacy and linguistic identity in a multilingual and plurilingual country such as Timor-Leste. Indigenous identities are multiple (Carneiro, 2010, p. 11), while the "colonial" identities are likewise plural, encompassing Indonesian, Portuguese, and, more recently, the persistent efforts of international organizations to promote the significance of English. Furthermore, it was not an indigenous language that played the principal role in resistance against Indonesian occupation. Portuguese was not understood by Indonesian authorities and therefore became an effective instrument of political struggle.

Nevertheless, in confronting this complex linguistic and identity diversity, independent Timor-Leste must also recognize that the aspirations of different groups are not necessarily unanimous. Multilingual literacy is not always the preferred option among



families in rural areas. It is therefore necessary to question who has the authority to speak on behalf of particular groups or of society as a whole, since this too is a field marked by contestation and contradiction. Literacy in the mother tongue is not a universally accepted solution, just as no other language of instruction will be universally accepted. Whether literacy is organized through a bilingual model (Portuguese and Tetum) or through a multilingual model involving mother tongues, it remains necessary to recreate educational contexts in which language and school-based thinking are meaningfully connected to the actual needs of the society concerned.

Conclusion

We contend that, for Freire, authentic emancipatory literacy requires the simultaneous pursuit of two interrelated objectives. First, learners must develop literacy grounded in their own historical experiences, cultural identities, and social realities. Second, they must acquire access to the linguistic and cultural codes of dominant social formations, thereby enabling them to move beyond the limitations imposed by their immediate context and engage critically with broader structures of power. As Freire and Macedo (2011, p. 79) observe, learners must “appropriate the codes and cultures of the dominant spheres so that they may transcend their own environment.” It is in this sense that Freire viewed his educational philosophy as convergent with the ideas of Amílcar Cabral:

To recognize the cultural nature of education, however, does not mean blessing every cultural expression, but rather recognizing that the struggle to overcome what Amílcar Cabral called the “weaknesses of culture” requires first acknowledging those very weaknesses. Hence, education must take the culture that it seeks, at least in part, to explain as an object of careful understanding, thereby questioning itself in the process. And the more education questions itself within the culture and society in which it takes place, the clearer it becomes that culture is a totality traversed by class interests, class differences, and class tastes (Freire & Macedo, 2011, pp. 85–86).

Despite the profound respect and admiration that Freire held for Amílcar Cabral, his struggle for liberation in the Portuguese-speaking African countries and his plans for emancipation and education diverged from those of the African leader regarding the role of the Portuguese language in post-independence education. Whereas Cabral viewed the appropriation of the colonial language as a strategy of national unification, Freire regarded the exclusive use of Portuguese as the language of literacy instruction as the principal reason for the failure of his method in several of the countries where he participated in adult literacy programs.

We argue, however, that the partial failure of the Freirean method in these African countries cannot be attributed solely to the issue of the language of instruction, as Freire himself maintained. What the critical theorist failed to identify was the crucial importance of teacher preparation and the training of the cultural animators involved in his literacy programs. Freire himself worked directly as a classroom teacher only during the early



and most successful phase of his career (Furter, 1998, pp. 83–84), and he achieved remarkable results in Angicos precisely because he personally conducted literacy instruction among an adult, working-class, and previously illiterate population, drawing upon a level of education and preparation associated with the social elite. In Africa, however, he delegated the role of implementation to local personnel who did not possess his training, knowledge, or pedagogical flexibility. As a consequence, the “Freire method” came to be implemented by teachers or cultural animators who were insufficiently prepared and who were quite possibly limited in their own mastery of the language of instruction. Under such circumstances, the *Popular Education Notebooks* were transformed into a technique to be applied mechanically, much like any other instructional manual. Freire himself insisted that “experiences and practices cannot be exported or imported. It follows that it is impossible to satisfy the request of anyone seeking to import practices from other contexts” (Freire & Macedo, 2011, p. 157). Yet the very architect of the literacy project was unable to implement it directly in contexts that he did not know in sufficient depth. In this sense, Freire ultimately became another academic specialist operating at a distance from the realities of implementation.

We conclude that this is the most important lesson that Freire offers to Timor-Leste and to its contemporary literacy challenges: the recognition that the preparation and professional training of teachers can never be underestimated in the implementation of any educational theory or policy, regardless of how correct, democratic, or emancipatory that policy may appear to be. In Timor-Leste, multilingual literacy is likely to encounter the same difficulties and limited outcomes as bilingual literacy so long as policymakers fail to acknowledge that the principal and most serious problem within the educational system is the insufficient pedagogical, theoretical, and subject-matter preparation of practicing teachers, regardless of the language in which they are expected to teach. Without such professional preparation, no teacher will be able to educate for emancipation, and no educator will be sufficiently critical to become an agent of transformation.

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