

Teaching Language for Liberation, National Unity and Social Justice in Guinea-Bissau *

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Abstract: Decree-Law No. 39 666/1954 set the terms for the recognition of nationality to the natives of the African colonies of Portugal in Angola, Guinea and Mozambique.

Among the various conditions required for the right to citizenship was the obligation to “speak and write the Portuguese correctly”, even knowing that at the time an overwhelming majority of the populations in those territories did not have access to school education, nor did they attend the places where this language was vehicular.

This Communication aims to lay the groundwork for the most consistent reflection possible by seeking answers to the following question:

What language or languages to use in the teaching process in Guinea-Bissau, given its multilingual reality and still present challenges of emancipation from the cultural subjugation resulting from Portuguese colonialism, but also for the promotion of national unity and social justice?

The answers to this question will be sought through analysis of sources and bibliography accessible to us about education in Guinea(-Bissau) from 1954 to our days, under the hypothesis that for a teaching that seeks the liberation from colonial alienation and promotes social justice and national unity, one should consider the specificities of each community and adopt the local language/s for the teaching process, along with *Kriol* and Portuguese.

Key words: language, teaching, liberation, national unity, social justice

1. Contextualization

The colonization, as a form of domination of peoples in their most varied social and economic structures, was not limited to the expropriation of land and its exploitation mainly through the indigenous workforce, although this is its most visible dimension. It was also a violent action on the cultures and ways of living of invaded societies.¹

Portugal, as a country with a political regime that was involved in this enduring process of alienation of secular experiences for the aggrandizement of its imperialist pride, is not exception to what was the normalization of this act, as witnessed by a variety of legislation and other sources of information at the service of/about the

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¹ About colonialism and its consequences in colonized societies, see: Césaire (1971) Fanon (1959, 1961), M Bokolo (2011).

colonial regime during its validity. Decree-Law No. 22:465, referring to the Colonial Act of April 1933, in Article 2, pointed to the following objective of Portuguese colonialism:

It is the organic essence of the Portuguese Nation to perform its historical function of possessing and colonizing overseas domes and civilizing the indigenous populations that lives there, also exercise the influence attached to it by the Eastern Patronage.

This alienating intention of the native populations based on the need to “civilize” passed, among many other processes of devaluation of the forms of indigenous cultural expression and elevation of the colonist civilization to the state of pattern, by imposing the Portuguese language as the only one to be used in administration, in teaching (although opening possibilities of recourse to national languages in specific cases) and even in case of a native of one of the three dominated territories of Africa (Angola, Guinea and Mozambique) to seek the accession to Portuguese citizenship, as evidenced by Article 32 (2) of the Colonial Act, as a condition of the acceptance of a non-national Portuguese for its overseas administrative staff, and article 56(a) of Decree-Law No. 39 666 of 20 May 1954 on the Statute of the Indigenous of the Overseas Provinces of Guinea, Angola and Mozambique, which fixed in their terms the obligation to “speak and write the Portuguese language correctly”, as one of the conditions for a native to leave the pejorative state from “indigenous” (uncivilized)² to “assimilated” and thus have access to the Portuguese identity card and consequent release of what Césaire would call “objectification” (1971, p. 23).

This primacy given to Portuguese (language) continued to have its effects in school institutions and public administration, even though the Statute of the Indigenous was later repealed in 1961 by Decree-Law No. 43 893, but also within the PAIGC (African Party of Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde) and supported by Amílcar Cabral, who considers the Portuguese language the greatest heritage left by colonialism to the peoples of Guinea and Cape Verde, having been the language chosen for teaching at the Party schools and later official language of independent Guinea-Bissau, which did not fail to raise questions from scholars such as Paulo Freire, for example, and ourselves, not in the sense of denying Cabral or censor his opinion, but considering the implications that this choice has in relation to the objectives of liberation, national unity and social justice, still in force in our days.

In this sense, the present communication aims to answer, through analysis of sources consulted on the teaching and liberation struggle in Guinea, to the following question: What language or languages to use in the teaching process in Guinea-Bissau, given its multilingual reality and challenges still current for emancipation from cultural subjugation resulting from Portuguese colonialism, but also for promotion of national unity and social justice?

It is, in fact, an issue much theorized by several researchers on the educational theme in Guinea-Bissau,³ however, the relevance of its resumption in this reflection is related to the need for further clarification of the linguistic issue as it is linked to colonial oppression and neocolonial aims, as we have already seen here and how the authors consulted on the subject understand it. Manuel Nassum (1994, pp. 57–58) makes the following observation:

Francophonie, Anglophony, Lusophony, etc., are nothing more than instruments for the reproduction of Africa's relations of domination by the countries of the Centre. It is a new form of colonization, since all ideas,

² Note that the opposite expression does not even say “civilized”, but “assimilated”.

³ See: Diallo (1989), Nassum (1994) and Augel (1996), the latter with two papers, in one of them, making a critical reading of the thesis of PhD Carolyn J. Benson (1994) about the use of *Kriol* in education in Guinea-Bissau and, in another, talking about the democratization of education in the country, the authors present interesting papers about the language of teaching in Guinea-Bissau, and their work has been used to support this return to the question.

ways of thinking and acting from abroad for African societies come to penetrate through these.

There is no doubt that the organizations that support these spaces for maintaining the relationship between former colonizer and former colonized countries function in the exclusive use of French, English and Portuguese as communication languages, which in many of the former colonies are the only ones considered official, as is the example of Portuguese in Guinea-Bissau.

It is also, and above all, our aim to bring the issue back to Guinea-Bissau's socio-educational debate in response to the demand for socio-political dynamics characterized by discourses that increasingly threaten national cohesion, due to its content of ethnic-religious instrumentalization for electoral purposes, without the response of the educational system against this imminent danger; in addition to the need to safeguard the right to expression and education of some majorities, in many cases, in their languages.

2. Language as a Mean to Express a Culture

As we have just seen, Portuguese colonialism, like all other colonial powers, despised the cultures of the dominated peoples and reduced their languages, means by which these peoples understand each other, to instruments with meaning of civilizational delay, or of human primitiveness. This aspect of subjugation did not escape the understanding that Amílcar Cabral and PAIGC had of Portuguese imperialist rule, and the General Secretary of the Party stated that “being colonial rule the denial of the historical process of dominated society, is necessarily the denial of its cultural process” (Cabral, 2008, p. 228). In this sense, given that “a society that truly frees itself from the foreign yoke, takes up the ascending paths of its own culture — the struggle for liberation is, first and foremost, an *act of culture*”⁴(*idem*). And, since the language is the most important mean of expression of a culture, considering what we have already said about the standardization of the Portuguese language in societies colonized by Portuguese imperialism, through the long alienation process called “assimilation”, it is important to bring to reflection the following consideration of Cabral about its meaning for Guinea(-Bissau):

The Portuguese (language) is one of the best things that *tugas* have left us, [and explains] because a language is not a proof of nothing more than an instrument, for men to relate to each other, it is an instrument, a mean to speak, to express the realities of life and the world (Cabral, 1974a, p. 214).

As we said elsewhere⁵, we are called by this statement of Cabral to outline the following question: Has Portuguese (language) been used in the colonial process as a simple instrument of communication? — Our answer to this question is in the opposite sense to the statement of the leader of PAIGC, because, considering the importance of language for the cultural expression of a people, and returning to the question of colonialism having repressed the cultures of the dominated peoples, the case of Guinea-Bissau does not escape this reality. As Paulo Freire sees, this consideration of Cabral in relation to the language of the colonist may have been one of the rare misconceptions of this remarkable combatant in the struggle for the liberation of African peoples under colonial rule, although it is the same Freire to draw attention to the fact that this choice of Amílcar was influenced by his care to avoid the condemnation of Guineans and Cape Verdeans, combatants, of anything that is Portuguese or foreigner (Freire, *apud* Romão, Gadotti, 2012).

However, the PAIGC independent leader went further, noting that, “for us, it makes both the use of

⁴ Italics of the original, as will always appear throughout our text.

⁵ We refer to an article of ours on the subject entitled “Portuguese Language and Colonization – case of Guinea-Bissau”, available online at: <https://www.buala.org/pt/a-ler/lingua-portuguesa-e-colonizacao-caso-da-guine-bissau>.

Portuguese, as the Russian, as the French, as well as the English, as it serves us, as it does to use tractors of the Russians, the English, the Americans, etc., provided that taking the independence, it serves us to cultivate the land” (Cabral, 1974a, p. 217). Here, we find that Cabral considered the Portuguese language mainly as an instrument of communication, letting slip the knowledge that we are certain he had in relation to its oppressive character and legitimation of discrimination, because it is he who draws our attention to this fact when, analyzing the colonial terms of “assimilation”, presents the statistical data pointing to about 99.7% of the population of the overseas territories where the Statute of the Indigenous was applied (Angola, Guinea and Mozambique) be considered “uncivilized”, because, among other criteria, “they could not speak and write the Portuguese correctly” (Cabral, 2008, p. 54), asserting: “If *the Portuguese had* to comply with these conditions [which also included economic conditions above the possibilities of the majority of the populations of these territories, taxes up-to-date and age from 18]⁶, more than 50% of the population would not be entitled to the status of “civilized” or “assimilated” (idem).

Another consideration of Amílcar Cabral that we consider pertinent to include in this analysis is the following and that leads us to the understanding that he was aware of the lack of grammatical description of *Kriol*⁷, for example, as one of the national languages that could be used on teaching process, but this, he says, “until a day when, in fact, having studied creole deeply, we find all the rules of phonetics good for creole, we can start writing creole” (Cabral, 1974a, p. 216). However, this consideration does not refer to other national languages with a high number of speakers, in some cases even higher than Portuguese and/or *Kriol*, if each one of them considered as the only one language spoken by a portion of the population. Was it because *Kriol* is regarded as a language of national understanding (of national unity for many opinions) and, therefore, benefited from Cabral’s nationalist vision? And wouldn’t the cultures expressed in other national languages be marginalized? These and other issues will be further explored in the next subtitle of this paper.

For now, it is important to sum up that, both for what we have just analyzed in relation to Amílcar Cabral’s thinking, as well as by our own conviction, there is no doubt about the importance of the use of our national languages in the teaching process as a way of promoting our liberation from the cultural subjugation we have been targeted since the beginning of colonialism, but also neocolonialism — as exhaustively analyzed by Nassum (1994) and Augel (1996) — and which today is legitimized by the absence of this fundamental instrument for learning in our school reality. We could also mention the following passage of the opening speech of the First Initiation Seminar on African Linguistics, in March 1978, in Bissau, delivered by Mário de Andrade, at the time General Coordinator of the National Council of Culture of Guinea-Bissau, considering “[...] it is clear that national languages are the source, support and vehicle of the values of civilization created by the African peoples throughout history, [so] the access of the majority of the population to modern knowledge necessarily proceeds from the revaluation of these means of communication” (O Militante, 1978, p. 44). A conscious observation of the challenges facing the country in the linguistic-cultural level, but which have been difficult to face due to instability in its governance.

For the next step in our exercise on this matter, and as a result of what has been said so far, we will try to answer the questions: What language to use for a teaching process that seeks to promote national unity and social justice? Is not the linguistic unity really an important element for the construction of national unity?

⁶ Confer the full conditions for assimilated status or citizenship to a non-native of Portugal in Article 56 and its points in the Statute of the Indigenous of the Overseas Provinces of Guinea, Angola and Mozambique.

⁷ Local name of “Creole” (language).

3. Teaching Language for National Unity and Social Justice in Guinea-Bissau

If since the pre-colonial period there was disputes between the ethnic groups that make Guinea-Bissau identity and cultural complex for the possession of the land or even domination of various ethnic groups by another with greater capacity for war, as happened from *Mandingas* to other ethnic groups for the consolidation of the kingdom of Kansalá (known as Kaabu Empire), or *Fulas* from Futa Djalon in relation to the *Mandingas* of Kaabu, for example, the consolidation of colonial power took place by taking advantage of the lack of unity between the different peoples that made up the territory that is now Guinea-Bissau, which is also hurried by the violent wars called “pacification”⁸, so the challenge of national unity is, in our view, a historical requirement for the ongoing process of the construction of the Guinean nation. Moreover, justifying the need to fight for national unity while fighting for independence, Cabral told his comrades at the November 1969 Staff Seminary that the long approach he made on the importance of the theme in the meeting, was “to give the comrades an idea of what unity is and to tell the comrades that the main foundation of unity is that to have unity it is necessary to have things different. If they are not different, there is no need of unity. There is no problem of unity” (Cabral, 1974b, p. 12). However, the differences to which Cabral referred was about the ethnic and religious diversity in the case of Guinea — which was not placed in the case of Cape Verde, which we will not refer to here — and that it was necessary to join the different forces to “act together”, making even reference to the maximum “union makes strength” to explain himself better to his companions. And we ask: Didn’t these differences arise in the linguistic domain? The answer is that, if what tends to show at first sight when we speak of the differences between *Balantas*, *Fulas*, *Mandingas*, *Pepel*, etc., are their linguistic differences, because it is undoubtedly their main identity element, of course the question of their union must also be at the linguistic level, especially since the language of greatest use among guerrillas of different ethnic origins was *Kriol*, the only one capable of serving as a mean of communication with the minimum of possible discrimination and the one we can talk about as the language of national identity without equivocations.

But does the language unity imply national unity? We are obliged to agree here with Ibrahima Diallo, an experienced researcher of the educational problem in Guinea-Bissau who, observing societies such as Chile under the Pinochet regime or Lebanon, with linguistic unities that did not prevent them from civil wars; or the fact that linguistic pluralism has not prevented the union of Guineans around the PAIGC for the liberation struggle, as argument to affirm that a project of national unity goes beyond the singularity of the linguistic question, yet it has recognized the role of the unity “with the facilities it gives in any society (united or not), in terms of intercommunication” (Diallo, 1989, p. 217), basing its concept of national unity, as a social project, with a passage of the recommendations of the III Congress of the PAIGC, meaning then “the liquidation of the exploitation of man by man and of all forms of subjection of the human person to degrading interests, for the benefit of individuals, groups or classes”, concluding that, in order to achieve this objective, there should be “profound changes in the essence of the economic ties that relate the members of society” (Diallo, 1989, p. 218).

For us, this view on the relationship between teaching language and national unity represents its important capital for the construction of the second question, although it is not made by this singular condition, considering the historical justification of having served in the experience of unifying people from different cultural realities for the struggle for national liberation, but especially when today our schools continue to operate without the use of

⁸ For more information about pre-colonies societies and the “Pacification War”, see Pélissier (1997), with complete reference here on the last page.

national languages for learning with a view to building the very social project for national unity to which Diallo refers and thus also be an element of defense in the face of the growing wave of ethnic instrumentalization for political-electoral purposes⁹, which puts the country more vulnerable to interethnic conflicts and, therefore, a threat to social peace and the affirmation of a national identity also supported by a linguistic element (in *this case Kriol*), even if it safeguards ethnic-cultural diversity, given that the 48 years of our independence nation under construction have already shown sufficient *compatibility between Kriol (language of all)* and other national languages.

In the touch of the teaching language/s for the promotion of social justice, we used the data from the 1979 census (Lepri & Diallo, 1989) to verify that the most widely spoken languages in the monolingual framework are, respectively: *Fula*, with 17% of the total population; *Balanta* with 15%, *Manding* 7% and *Manjaco* with 5%, accounting all together to 44% of the total population which, added to 44% corresponding to *the Kriol*-speaking population in situations of bilingualism and/or trilingualism, total 88% of the population, a “large majority” (compared to Portuguese, with 11% of the population, but is official language and the one of schooling), what leads Diallo (1989, p. 213) to consider that “the choice of Creole, *Balanta*, *Fula*, *Mandinga* and *Manjaco*, at the same time, would be a great step towards the solution of the problem of national languages in the teaching/learning process” and for the promotion of social justice, we add, given that language is one of the key elements of sociocultural life realization.

This conviction is reinforced by the 2009 General Census of Population and Housing, 36 years after the proclamation of our independence, pointing out to 25.7% of the population with Guinean nationality speaking *Fula*; followed by *Balanta* with 19.7%, *Mandinga* 12.8%, *Pepel* 7.4%, *Manjaco* with 7.3%, which corresponds, in total, to 72% of the country’s population. 90.4% of the Guinean population speaks *Kriol*, clearly assuming itself as the language of national understanding. However, none of these languages mostly spoken and directly linked to the cultural diversity of the country are officially used in the practice of teaching and, paradoxically, is the Portuguese, with 27.1% of speakers, the official language of the country and the only one in which one learns at schools. The French and English languages, with only 5.1% and 2.9% of speakers, respectively, are the others used in formal education in Guinea-Bissau.

From the 1979 Census		
Language	Speakers in %	General Total
Kriol	44%	88%
Fula	17%	
Balanta	15%	
Mandinga	7%	
Manjaco	5%	
From the 2009 Census		
Language	Speakers in %	General Total (*without <i>Kriol</i>)
Kriol	90.4%*	72%
Fula	25.7%	
Balanta	19.7%	
Mandinga	12.8%	
Pepel	7.4%	

⁹ A strategical act that not begins nowadays and which is done, among other formulas, from the populist use of the marginalization condition in which these ethnic groups and their cultures are left by the same opportunistic political elite, in most cases.

Manjaco	7.3%	
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Sources: Diallo (1989); INE (2009).

It should be clarified that, in the case of ethnic languages, the data for the 1979 census are presented in percentages for monolingual speakers, other than the 2009 census data, in which populations speaking national ethnic languages are considered in the multilingual framework of the country, without specifying the number of languages spoken by them.

Regarding the *Kriol*-speaking population, the 1979 data refers to bilingual and/or trilingual speakers, as has already been said, in contrast to those of 2009, in which speakers of the same language are identified considering the total population that uses it for communication, including speakers of other languages spoken in the country.

Before moving on to the next point of our work, it is important to repeat a finding of both Amílcar Cabral (2008) and Manuel Nassum (1994) that the populations of Guinean territory have always resisted the will of colonialist cultural domination, that these willing never worked, as can be confirmed by the percentage of Portuguese speakers compared to the national languages speakers in the data submitted from the two censuses consulted for this work. The last author was very fortunate to note that “the wider the school network, the greater the number of *Kriol* speakers and those who try to learn to express themselves, with failure, in Portuguese” (Nassum, 1994, pp. 72–73), even though the dominance over this language (Portuguese) is often purposeful and wrongly confused with elevation of the intellectual level and, for this, its speaker deserves “admiration” both among the elite in the power (among who are many members with deficit of schooling, it should be said), as well as among the population, who are increasingly obliged to dominate, in addition to Portuguese, French and English, to have access to better jobs in their own country, facts that not only increase the discrimination of the majorities that don’t speak these languages by the school system, as the elitist and segregationist instrument that they are still in Guinea-Bissau, particularly the Portuguese, even with almost half a century of the country’s political independence.

4. Final Considerations

As Frantz Fanon says: “to speak a language is to assume a world, a culture” (1959, p. 50). And this statement fully agrees with what Amílcar Cabral (2008) considers the liberation of a people under colonial yoke also as a march to revalue its subordinated culture for centuries and, consequently, resumes the construction of its own history, adulterated, devalued during the validity of colonial power in the dominated territories and which still continues today a need for redemption and revaluation.

In the case of Guinea-Bissau, a country with challenges of valuing its culture for the continuity of the struggle for independence of colonial alienation which marks still present in its social dynamics, the use of its most representative national languages within its population in the practice of teaching/learning is an imperative at the same time historical, and for the achievement of two other challenges that underlie our reflection: national unity and social justice.

A didactic imperative because language being the main instrument of communication, of the interaction between men and above all the main element of their identity, its use for any educative system should consider its historical value (why not ideological?), but above all its effective use by the population that is intended to educate in order to take over the process of transforming a context — by many called development, but which we prefer to name progress — being also the justification that leads us to the dimension of social justice, in the context of

which the language is one of the main tools for the realization of socio-community life and, therefore, societies and/or communities should carry out their educational process in the languages they identify themselves more.

In Guinea-Bissau, the dimension of social justice must be seen together with the national unity, even if we accept the non-coincidence of linguistic unity and national unity, but above all because the realization of such a project of society to which Ibrahima Diallo refers, including all its facets leading to this plan, needs to be the main foundation of the educational system, organization and curriculum development. This challenge becomes more pertinent to embrace, when we are faced with the fact that, even today, the fluent use of Portuguese for communication is connoted with the idea of intellectual superiority and, thus, covered with an idea of being of a higher social condition in relation to those who do not have this privilege. The same is applied to the *Kriol* speakers, national language, in relation to people who speak the various ethnic languages of the country or who do not use the one with fluency in their day-to-day communication.

These choices, however, should not exclude the Portuguese from the education system, which would also be unfair and harmful to the system itself, given the importance consolidated by this language as the only one officially recognized in the context, for the long history with this status and for being the first language of contact with the world outside (even known that in this case French and English would be more useful). However, there is another problem relating to the method applied in the schools for the teaching of this language, which ignores that it's a foreign or non-maternal language in Guinean context, which has its harmful didactic consequences for learners.

As we see, the discussion about the issue doesn't begin nowadays and there is no lack of solid arguments, resulting from serious and in-depth studies of our socio-cultural context and our challenges in the educational sector, but if until today what ultimately matters is not reached — the use of the most spoken national languages in teaching — it is for lack of political will, on the one hand, but also as yet another consequence of the recurrent political and military instability, on the other, and which have obstructed the governance of the country from 1980 to nowadays, continuing to undermine efforts to implement various studies and visions with transformative potential of various sectors of the country's social life, such as education and culture.

Recognizing that the country's economic and financial limitation is another obstacle to overcoming the proposal we have reinforced here, it is our belief that improving the quality of teaching and learning in Guinea-Bissau will largely depend on the adoption of its most spoken national languages to serve as teaching languages in communities whose cultural dynamics impose that choice.

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