

Linguistic ambiguity in Timor-Leste: local languages between pride and shame

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ABSTRACT

Emerging from centuries of Portuguese colonisation and a violent Indonesian military occupation lasted 24 years (1975-1999), Timor-Leste became the first sovereign state of the 21st century, in 2002. The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste adopted Portuguese and Tetun Dili as the two national languages and this decision has been under debate since the birth of the nation, not just among local politicians, but also among foreign consultants and scholars. Based on an ethnographic fieldwork lasted 18 months, conducted between 2017 and 2018, this paper aims to address the ambiguities regarding the linguistic diversity in Timor-Leste. Local indigenous languages have been undergoing a process of governmental recognition (being 20 the local languages mentioned in the Constitution as ‘mother tongues’) and other international institutions have developed projects aimed to their safeguard. However, often both in national institutions as well as to a more grassroot level, the local linguistic diversity is considered more as a burden than as an asset. By focusing on these local ambiguities, the paper aims to discuss the interaction between linguistic prestige and status, as well as economic relations embedded in the Timor-Leste national linguistic policies.

KEYWORDS

East Timor; Timor-Leste; indigenous languages; nation building; national languages; shame.

INTRODUCTION

“UNESCO knows nothing about Timor-Leste”.¹ These were the strong words used by Taur Matan Ruak, President of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, in 2017, commenting on the EMBLI (Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education Programme). EMBLI is an international plan coordinated by UNESCO, which aims to strengthen the use of native local East Timorese languages as teaching languages in the primary schools throughout the country.² Taur Matan Ruak’s words were broadcast on national TV, during the 8 PM news that most East Timorese watch. I was watching the TV me too, together with the family who hosted me in Daralata during my doctoral ethnographic fieldwork.³ The strong words pronounced by the President of the Republic of Timor-Leste really struck me.

Why was the President of Timor-Leste so angry with UNESCO? What is the role of the local native languages in the country? And how are they perceived? What is EMBLI trying to implement and why the governmental structure seems against this plan? Discussing these questions is helpful to understand the profound complexity of the country’s language policies and politics.

Timor-Leste is a quite linguistically diverse country: Ethnologue registers around 20 alive languages⁴ in a geographical area as big as Sicily and with a population of 1,3 million inhabitants.⁵ I started to get interested in the East Timorese context while I was attending my undergraduate course in Portuguese language, already in 2010. That small territory off the northern

¹ The original sentence in Tetun Dili was “UNESCO la hatene buat ida kona ba Timor-Leste”.

² Cf. <http://timor-leste.gov.tl/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Eng-Executive-Summary-for-EMBLI-Endline-Assessment-V4.pdf>, last accessed on 05.08.2021.

³ I conducted my fieldwork between January 2017 and April 2018 in Venilale, subregion of the Baukau region, eastern district of the country. I lived with two different families of the area, the first in Daralata (February-August 2017), a very small village in the South, and the second one in Waikulale (between September 2017 and April 2018), a northern village.

⁴ Cf. <https://www.ethnologue.com/country/TL/languages>, last accessed on 05.08.2021.

⁵ Cf. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=TL>, last accessed on 05.08.2021.

coasts of Australia caught my eye precisely because of its linguistic diversity as well as because of its recent and troubled history. Former Portuguese colony, Timor-Leste has suffered a 24-years military invasion from Indonesia, acquiring its national independence only in 2002. Currently, the Constitution of the Republic of Timor-Leste recognises Portuguese and Tetun Dili or Tetun Prasa⁶ as the two official national languages; English and Bahasa Indonesia as work languages, and the local native languages are considered as part of the national heritage and identity that the State declares to preserve and develop.⁷ Tetun Dili is the most widely spoken language of the country, being often the second language of most of East Timorese people, especially outside of Dili, the capital city (Williams-van Klinken 2015). In fact, the people who speak Tetun Dili as their first or best language generally live in Dili. Public schools use both Portuguese and Tetun Dili as means of instruction. However, the number of the East Timorese speakers of Portuguese is attested around 10% of the total population (Simões 2015). The media use interchangeably both official languages, as well as Bahasa Indonesia. This last language is well known and understood by most of the population, especially the ones who were born and lived during the 24 years of the Indonesian military occupation (the so-called *jerasaun foun*, young generation).

In Daralata, in 2017, the language used for the daily communication was Makasae, mother-tongue of most of the population of the area. However, Makasae is but one of the local languages spoken in Venilale. In the subregion, in fact, there are at least other two local languages spoken: Kairui-Midiki and Waima'a. While Makasae belongs to the Papuan linguistic *phylum*,⁸ the other two belong to the Austronesian linguistic family.⁹ On TV the common languages spoken are Tetun Dili and Bahasa Indonesia, language spoken by the characters of soap operas, films, and advertisement on TV. There are two editions of the news, the main one in Tetun Dili and the second one in Portuguese. At the local primary school of the village, pupils and teachers used to speak Makasae with each other, but then Tetun Dili and Portuguese were used as vehicular and teaching languages during the lessons. This linguistic situation is not present only in the Venilale subregion, but it is quite common in the rest of the country too (Walter 2016).

⁶ The official language is commonly known as Tetun and even the Constitution refers to this language as Tetun. However, linguists have registered the presence of different varieties of Tetun (Williams-van Klinken 2010). Namely, Tetun Terik or Belu and Tetun Dili or Prasa. And this is the reason why I distinguish the official language (Tetun Prasa) from the Tetun Terik, a variety spoken in the eastern part of the country.

⁷ Cf. <http://www.unesco.org/education/edurights/media/docs/7aa8c8cd63d2e3ec8a6546d6ba1f4071161ce516.pdf>, pp. 11-12, last accessed on 05.08.2021.

⁸ Cf. <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/mkz>, last accessed on 05.08.2021.

⁹ Cf. <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/wmh> and <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/krd>, last accessed on 05.08.2021.

With this short, yet emblematic, depiction I want to point out the linguistic richness of Timor-Leste, by some considered linguistic confusion (McAuliffe 2009). This work aims to present some of the ambiguities within the national policies concerning languages in Timor-Leste, by pointing out the social and historical values and meanings attached to the languages spoken in the country. In Timor-Leste, in fact, Portuguese, Tetun Dili, Bahasa Indonesia, English, and the other local languages are far from being neutral ways of communication. Status and prestige are often embedded in them, and I suggest that discussing the historical context as well as social configurations is necessary in order to understand the values attached to all these languages.

This paper wants to discuss the current multilingual situation in Timor-Leste, by linking it to the recent past of the territory, as well as to current governmental plans, aimed to develop the use of foreign languages throughout the country. I will discuss both the role of Portuguese, Tetun Dili and the other local languages in the country, stressing the entanglements between old and new generations, as well as opposite ways of imagining both the imagined national community as well as the linguistic diversity of the country. In the first section I present the historical context, from the Portuguese colonisation to the Restoration of the national independence of 2002, focusing on the connections between languages, politics, and identity. The second part of the paper analyses instead the different perspectives existing with regard to the choice of having Portuguese as a national language. Finally, I focus on the role of native languages, by showing the ambiguities and the contradictions of some of the governmental decisions, related to the language teaching in schools.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Timor-Leste was a Portuguese colony until 1975. By that time, Portuguese had been an elitist language, spoken by a tiny East Timorese minority of so-called *mestiços* and *assimilados*¹⁰ (Costa 2001, 59-60; Donzelli 2012, 138, Leach 2003, 140). Gavin Jones points out that by the 1970s the literacy rate in Timor-Leste was estimated to be around 10%. The school system was coordinated by the Church and not by the colonial administration. The first and only secondary school of the country was opened only in 1952 and the number of students enrolled was between 200 and 800 during the 1960s. The number of schools present in the country in the aftermath of the end of the colonial era (1974-75) were only 47. There were no universities; in fact, the *mestiços* and *assimilados* who wanted to attend them, had to go to Portugal

¹⁰ These are two common Portuguese expressions that were used in the Portuguese colonies to refer to people born from relationships between native women and Portuguese men, as well as to local people who managed to attend Portuguese schools.

to do so (Jones 2003, 41-43). The Catholic Church translated the Bible into Tetun Terik (Anderson 1993; Costa 2001), and into other local languages too (such as in Makasae, for example), creating a written and high variety of the language. Despite the differences between Tetun Dili and Tetun Terik linguistic varieties, however, the decision of translating the Bible was crucial for the use of this language as a *lingua franca* throughout the country, including the rural areas and not only the urban centres.

With the Portuguese Revolution on 25 April 1974 (*Revolução dos Cravos*) and the destitution of the dictatorship in Portugal, the Portuguese authorities in Timor-Leste made possible the creation of the first local political parties.¹¹ However, violent tensions between the parties rose in 1975. The Portuguese governmental representatives left the territory during the summer of 1975 and the Fretilin party declared the national independence of Timor-Leste on 28 November 1975. However, the radical ideas conveyed by the party were interpreted as communist and considered as threatening internationally especially by Indonesia and Australia, neighbour countries, as well as by the USA. Indonesia used the pretext of the violence resulting from the political tensions as well as of the allegedly 'radical' left-wing political ideas of Fretilin to occupy the territory on 7 December 1975. The Indonesian military occupation in Timor-Leste lasted 24 years, until 1999.

During the Indonesian occupation, the language used by the administration, in the schools and by the media was Bahasa Indonesia,¹² while for day-to-day interactions the common languages used by the population were Tetun Dili and other local languages. It was during the Indonesian military occupation that the Catholic Church deliberately offered the mass in Tetun and not in Bahasa Indonesia. On the one hand, this choice has been interpreted as an active means of resisting Indonesian integration (Anderson 1993; Budiardjo; Liong 1984, 119-124). On the other, however, it helped the formation of a common sentiment of belonging related to Tetun, as a national language.

In addition, during the Indonesian military occupation, the armed East Timorese resistance used Portuguese as a means of communication, to avoid being caught and understood by the Indonesian army. This is among the reasons why Portuguese was chosen as one of the two official languages of the country (Ruak 2001). Moreover, Portuguese has been used as a common language of the Portuguese-speaking countries, during their fight against Portugal. The Portuguese-speaking world is composed by former Portuguese colonies that, together with Portugal, nowadays shape the CPLP (*Comunidade*

¹¹ The main parties formed were ASDT (Pt., *Associação Social-Democrata Timorense*), UDT (Pt., *União Democrática Timorense*) and APODETI (Pt., *Associação Popular Democrata Timor-Leste*).

¹² As Donzelli points out, the Indonesian administration prohibited the use of Portuguese (2012).

dos Países de Língua Portuguesa). I argue that this suggests that there might be a connection between all the former Portuguese colonies, namely the African one (Angola, Moçambique, São Tomé e Príncipe, Cape Verde, Guiné-Bissau,) and Timor-Leste, that had all fought against the Portuguese colonial power between the 1960s and the 1970s (Boldoni 2014). I suggest that it is relevant to consider the bonds between all the former Portuguese colonies, and not just the bond between Timor-Leste and Portugal, to understand the reasons why the national East Timorese government chose Portuguese as national language in 2002. The common language is a means through which the Portuguese-speaking world stays connected, not just a submission/recognition of the Portuguese *metropole*. Many important figures for the national independence, in fact, had connections with other former African Portuguese colonies.¹³ The ideological, political, social, and linguistic connection among the former Portuguese African colonies and Timor-Leste is still strong nowadays (Boldoni 2014).

By the beginning of the 1980s the schools in the country were more than 300 and the number grew to 600 in the 1990s (Jones 2003, 41-43). Clearly, the rapid growth of the schools during the Indonesian occupation as well as the improvement of the road system had to do with the Indonesian integrationist programme. However, some of my interlocutors, used to stress the fact that important services such as electricity, infrastructures, the mail services, and schools were developed only during the Indonesian occupation and not during the Portuguese colonisation. During colonial times, in fact, these services were present but only in Dili and only for the administrative elite (Boldoni 2014, 72-73).

The intense diplomatic activities of figures such as José Ramos-Horta and Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo, who were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996, led to the realisation of the East Timorese national independence. In 1999, the UN created a regional military force to intervene in the region, with the aim of turning Timor-Leste into an independent nation. Timor-Leste finally gained national independence from Indonesia in 2002.

¹³ José Ramos-Horta, son of a Portuguese deported to Timor, was exiled to Mozambique for his anti-colonial activities during the 1970s. Alkatiri, an Arab descendant (his ancestors arrived in Timor around 1800 from Yemen), also left the country in the 1970s to study in Angola, where he contacted the local anti-colonial front (Niner 2007, 114). By the end of 1975, when Indonesia had already occupied the East Timorese territory, Alkatiri and Ramos-Horta, together with Rogério Lobato and Roque Rodrigues left Dili flying to an external delegation of Fretilin based in Mozambique (117). Not to mention other Timorese political leaders of the 1970s, who studied in Lisbon and came back to the country as anti-colonial leaders – because in Lisbon they were in contact with anti-colonial theorists from the other Portuguese African colonies.

With the Restoration of Independence of the country,¹⁴ on 20 May 2002, the national government chose Portuguese and Tetun Dili as national official languages. However, despite the official recognition of Portuguese as one of the two official languages of the Republic of Timor-Leste, and even though Timor-Leste is part of the CPLP,¹⁵ Ethnologue counts that Portuguese in Timor-Leste is a mother-tongue for less than 6000 people.¹⁶ Portuguese is in fact rarely used in common and day-to-day conversations: it is mostly used as a formal and prestigious language by government institutions, mostly in Dili. During both my fieldworks in the country, I could observe that Portuguese was spoken by a very small minority of the population, namely old people who could learn it before 1975 (Leach 2003, 140). Therefore, due to historical reasons, currently the *jerasaun foun* (young generation, born after 1975) speak Tetun and Bahasa Indonesia fluently, while the *jerasaun tuan* (old generation, born during the Portuguese colonisation) is relatively more fluent in Tetun and Portuguese – in addition to the native languages that have been used for domestic and daily conversations until the present day.

PORTUGUESE AS THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE

As mentioned, Portuguese was crucial in the definition of the nation, and this is intertwined with the Catholic presence throughout the territory. The current national narrative describes the Portuguese presence as having allowed the unification of the different kingdoms under the same jurisdiction, the same faith, and the same language, leading to the creation of the East Timorese nation (Arthur 2020; Boldoni 2020; Leach 2008, 145-146; Ruak 2001). The Catholic Church and missionaries used to administer the school system (Jones 2003), spreading both literacy and the Gospel, as mentioned before. From such a perspective, then, Catholicism as well as the Portuguese presence define the East Timorese identity as unique towards the neighbouring countries, especially towards Indonesia. As Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world, and the Indonesian territory of West Timor is mainly Protestant, Catholicism and the choice of Portuguese as a national language makes Timor-Leste a unique country within Southeast Asia. Due to

¹⁴ The East Timorese government considers the self-proclaimed independence of 28 November 1975 as the official date of the national independence. Therefore, 28 May 2002 corresponds to the Restoration of the Independence of the country, after 24 years of illegal military occupation of the Indonesian army.

¹⁵ *Comunidade do Países de Língua Portuguesa* (Pt., Community of the Portuguese Language Countries). Cf. <https://www.cplp.org/id-2778.aspx>, accessed on 08.12.2019.

¹⁶ Cf. <https://www.ethnologue.com/country/TL/languages>, last consulted on 4/8/2021.

its peculiar socio-historical identity, Timor-Leste deserved to be an independent country. However, this kind of narrative is not considered inclusive by many East Timorese citizens, namely the young generations (*gerasaun foun*).

The East Timorese political leadership which has been in charge since 2002 is the same that used to oversee the armed resistance during the Indonesian occupation (Leach 2008; Magalhães 2015, 34-36). Just to give an example, Taur Matan Ruak was the Chief of the Resistance against Indonesia during the 1990s. With the Restoration of Independence, he was appointed as Major General of the National Army (F-FDTL) from 2009 to 2011. From 2012 to 2017 he was the President of the Republic of Timor-Leste and since 2018 he has been the Prime Minister of the country. He justifies the choice of Portuguese as the national language for historical reasons, pointing out that Portuguese was the language used by the armed resistance during the independence fight against Indonesia (Ruak 2001).

However, other relevant perspectives should be taken into consideration. During my fieldwork, I discussed these issues with many young East Timorese people. Most of my interlocutors were well-educated and all had had the chance to study abroad, mainly in anglophone countries (UK, USA, Australia, New Zealand). They often questioned many central governmental choices, such as the choice of Portuguese as the national language or the inference of the Catholic Church within governmental political activities. They interpreted the choice of Portuguese as a national language as a way to look back to colonialism and a choice that does not fit with the practical needs of the young generations of Timor-Leste, within Southeast Asia. However, speaking Portuguese is among the criteria to be hired within the governmental structure, NGOs and other national institutions. In a country where a very small minority speak Portuguese fluently, this linguistic criterion seems to willingly exclude the youngest people from the institutional and political life of the country.

Aurora Donzelli reconfigures the choice of Portuguese as one of the two national languages as if it was “suspended between an ambiguous display of colonial nostalgia, a pragmatic choice aimed at minimising Australian and Indonesian political-economic influence and the attempt of constructing a new sense of national identity” (Donzelli 2012, 138). The young generation (*gerasaun foun*) feels misrecognised by the official perspective that interprets Portuguese as part of the national heritage and identity, besides feeling excluded from “symbolic sources of power” (Leach 2003, 141). As Leach suggests, the contraposition between ‘elder’ and ‘younger’ reflects a major ‘fault line’ in the national politics, between the political establishment – mainly constituted by the ‘old generation’ – and ‘younger’ ideas opposed to it (Leach 2008). He highlights the importance of languages in the tensions existing between the young and old generations, as well as of different ideas of the national narrative and identity, linked to the colonial legacy (2003; 2008).

Choosing Portuguese as one of the two national languages has not been a neutral nor a consensual choice in East Timor. The disagreement related to this choice led to different ways of conceiving the public schooling teaching, as I present in the following section.

THE PLACE OF LOCAL LANGUAGES

During my fieldwork I spoke only Tetun Dili with my interlocutors. I tried to learn the local languages that my hosts used to talk, but without improvements. People were surprised about the topic of my research, my willing to better understand local languages and traditions. In Dili, many of my interlocutors often asked “What can you learn over there?”, in the rural areas of the country. When I met for the first time my hosts and the local Mayor, in their welcoming presentation of Venilale, they all listed the different languages spoken within the territory, as well as the name of the villages. They described the differences between places and villages, highlighting the internal divisions and boundaries (both physical and cultural) among them. Differentiation and diversity were foundational aspects of the ‘community’ itself. However, at the same time, my interlocutors often found hilarious that a foreigner researcher wanted to learn their *dialects* – as they used to name them – and often described their language as uneducated and not suitable for an educated woman – as I was to their eyes.

Both the local population and the governmental apparatus often attach stigma and shame on the native local languages in Timor-Leste. These languages are often considered inferior, belonging to uneducated people. The short video broadcast by the news that I referred to in the introduction of this paper, continued with Taur Matan Ruak explaining that East Timor cannot compete with other neighbouring nations, if the children of the country only speak “dialects”. He then stressed that children in school should learn Portuguese, English and Bahasa Indonesia, not Fataluku.¹⁷

In Daralata, my hosts wanted me to teach Portuguese at the local primary school: the reception of the teachers was incredibly warm, despite my uneasiness in that role. To them it was not relevant that I was not Portuguese, nor that I had never taught Portuguese to children. Some of the teachers did not understand Portuguese themselves, hence their request to help. But above all, my identity represented what the teachers and my hosts considered prestigious: to them, I was a white European woman, who had studied Portuguese,

¹⁷ Fataluku is one of the native languages spoken in Timor-Leste, namely in the eastern region of the country, Lospalos, where the EMBLI Project has been implemented in the last years. Cf. <https://www.laohamutuk.org/educ/CAFE/PolicyPt.pdf>, last accessed 09.08.2021.

and who had come to East Timor to get in touch with the local culture. It was my chance to give back the hospitality that the community was giving me and at the same time, they felt lucky to have a “Portuguese teacher” in Daralata.

Before starting the lessons, the children would sing the national anthem, in Portuguese; they would then pray the Hail Mary and Our Father in Tetun Terik, used by the Church for the liturgical texts; they spoke Makasae among them and with the teachers. However, the lessons were in Tetun and Portuguese. As soon as I started the teaching, I realised that most of the children in the class (between 8 and 9 years old) did not understand Tetun either. How was it possible to teach them a foreign language, such as Portuguese, using an unknown language, that was Tetun Dili?

To this very question, UNESCO provided an answer, by coordinating the EMBLI Pilot Educational Programme. This pilot project started to be implemented in 2012 and continues to the present day in 10 schools where 99% of the educational population speaks the same local language: four schools in the region of Oé-cusse, where the mother-tongue is Baikeno, three in Lospalos, where most of the population speak Fataluku, and three in Manatuto, where the language spoken is Galolen. EMBLI has raised several questions and critiques, especially among the governmental institutions, highly skeptical towards the project. The project prepares teachers and materials for teaching, using local languages. The project aims to provide schooling education in the common language of the children, and, at the same time, it helps keeping local languages alive. Tetun and Portuguese are introduced gradually, since they are considered as foreign languages. At the end of 2015, an external evaluation of the project measured its success in reaching its educational goals. The report showed that pupils in EMBLI schools demonstrated better reading skills and were more successful in the various subjects.¹⁸

However, many are the concerns related to this policy, such as that the project might minimise the effectiveness of learning the official languages. Another concern is related to the fact that teaching in different languages throughout the country might lead to regional divisions that threaten national unity. On the other side, however, supporters of this policy argue that EMBLI promotes social inclusion and tolerance for difference in a multilingual and multicultural society and therefore promotes unity building.

At the same time, in the attempt of strengthening the national identity, as well as increasing the number of speakers of Portuguese, the East Timorese government has implemented the CAFE educational programme.¹⁹ CAFE schools are public schools in which Portuguese is used as teaching language,

¹⁸ Cf. <http://timor-leste.gov.tl/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Eng-Executive-Summary-for-EMBLI-Endline-Assessment-V4.pdf>, last accessed on 10.08.2021.

¹⁹ CAFE is the acronym for Centros de Aprendizagem e Formação Escolar, meaning School Learning and Training Centres.

since pre-school to the secondary level. The main mission of the CAFE project is to improve the quality of teaching and promote fluency in the Portuguese language for children. CAFE is the result of a bilateral agreement, signed between Portugal and East Timor in 2009. There are currently 13 CAFE schools, one in each region of the country, all of which located in urban areas. According to the NGO La'o Hamutuk,²⁰ less than 3% of the total number of students attending all public schools attend CAFE schools.²¹

Unlike the project promoted by UNESCO, the CAFE schooling approach argues that the use of Portuguese as the teaching language at school, since the nursery, will help children learning Portuguese as a primary language. Unfortunately, the majority of pupils in Timor-Leste do not have access either to the EMBLI or to the CAFE schools, but to schools that resemble the model provided by the public school of Daralata, especially in the rural areas of the country.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the fact that local indigenous languages have undergone a process of governmental recognition in Timor-Leste, both governmental institutions as well as other social actors seem to consider the local indigenous languages as part of an undeveloped and backward past. This work aimed to present some of the ambiguities related to the national linguistic policies, highlighting the values and meanings embedded within languages. Historical as well as political reasons are deployed by the different political stances to justify the use of a language or another; status, prestige and shame are other important aspects that led to public disagreement as well as governmental decisions. Languages are fundamental within the nation building that East Timor has been undergoing, since they are powerful identity markers. For all these reasons, many are the ambiguities and contradictions embedded in the governmental decisions related to the linguistic policies in the country.

²⁰ La'o Hamutuk, funded in 2000, is an East Timorese NGO that analyses and reports on development processes throughout the country. Literally, 'la'o hamutuk' means walking together in Tetun Dili.

²¹ Cf. <https://www.laohamutuk.org/educ/CAFE/18CafePt.htm#summ>, last accessed 10.08.2021.

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