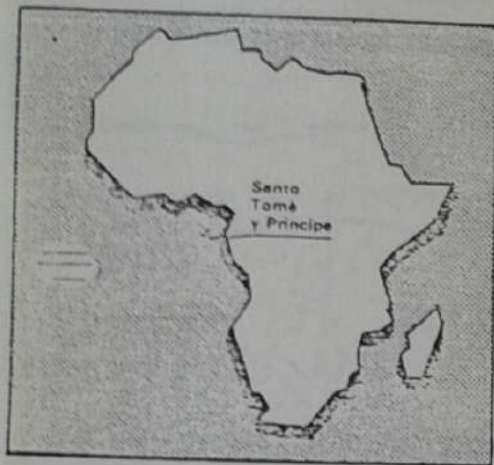


Letters for a young nation

by Paulo Freire



The Democratic Republic of São Tomé and Príncipe consists of two volcanic islands situated in the Gulf of Guinea, some 300 kilometres from the coast of Africa. Formerly a Portuguese colony, this small country (964 sq. km.; population less than 100,000) achieved independence in 1975 and became a member of Unesco on 22 January 1980. Its economy is based on agriculture, the main crops being cocoa, coffee, palm oil and copra. Below we present excerpts from a literacy teaching handbook prepared by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire as a contribution to a literacy campaign recently launched in São Tomé and Príncipe. The handbook is written in the form of letters addressed to the country's literacy workers and shows how the method of education based on "conscientization", which Freire has developed, can be put into practice. It is published by the Co-ordinating Commission of the Popular Culture Circles of the Republic of São Tomé and Príncipe.

OUR task is to enable many of our comrades, especially but not exclusively those living in rural areas, to read and write, which they were forbidden to do under the colonial régime. This task is a political one. The very decision to teach people to read and write is a political act. And come what may we must be on our guard against insinuations, sometimes ingenuous, sometimes sly, which are made to convince us that teaching reading and writing is purely a technical matter, a question of training, and that accordingly it should not be "mixed up with politics". The fact is that education, teaching adults to read and write, can never be neutral. All education presupposes, by its very nature, a political intention.

who can become specialists through working with the people, not for "experts" who are remote from the people, do not believe in the people, and are incapable of communicating with the people.

If teaching people to read and write, like all education, is a political act, it is also an act of knowledge. In the relationship between the educator and the person being educated, the acquisition of a piece of knowledge is always at stake. And in broaching this problem we are bound to insist, yet again, that there must be no incoherence between our political choice and our practical work as educators. For example, can we as revolutionary educators act towards those who are being educated in the same way as colonialist teachers, conforming to a colonialist ideology, behaved towards "their" pupils? When faced with this question, we must not simply tell ourselves that we should be different from colonialist teachers; we must consciously adopt a practice which is totally opposed to theirs.

The colonialist educator usually transmitted "his" knowledge to us, and it was up to us to swallow wholesale this knowledge which, to cap everything, distorted our own experience by colouring it with the interests of the colonialists. The colonialist who taught reading and writing "taught" that b and a equalled "Ba", and this had to be repeated and memorized by the learner.

Our revolution now underway demands us to be in tune with it at every level of our action. And so we do not talk of "Night Schools for Adults" but of "Circles of Culture"; we do not speak of illiterates but

of persons "on the way to literacy"; we do not speak of "literacy teachers" but of "Culture Group Leaders" who work with the Circles of Culture; we do not talk about lessons but about debates, about the people's authentic experience referred to by what are called "generator words" and depicted in "codification" which is analysed and discussed with the people.

And so, in a society in which "silence is not possible", the function of the man or woman who becomes a culture group leader, considered in relation to the members of the group who are on the way to literacy, is not that of a transmitter of knowledge but that of someone who, through discussion, tries to learn jointly with those who are on the way to literacy.

According to the political principles which guide our movement, literacy teaching is an activity during which the persons on the

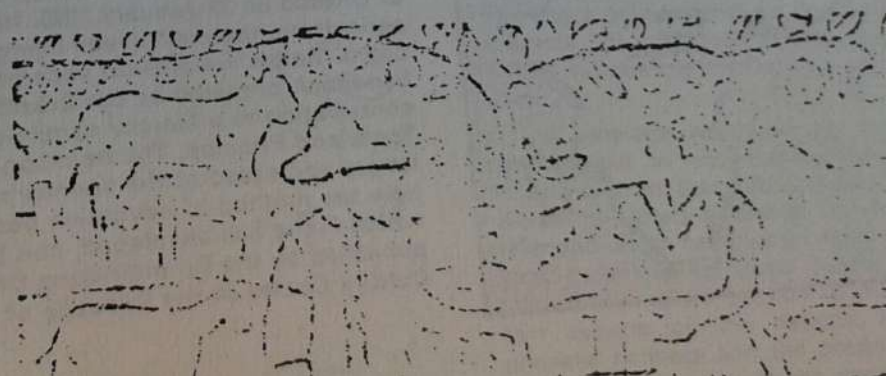
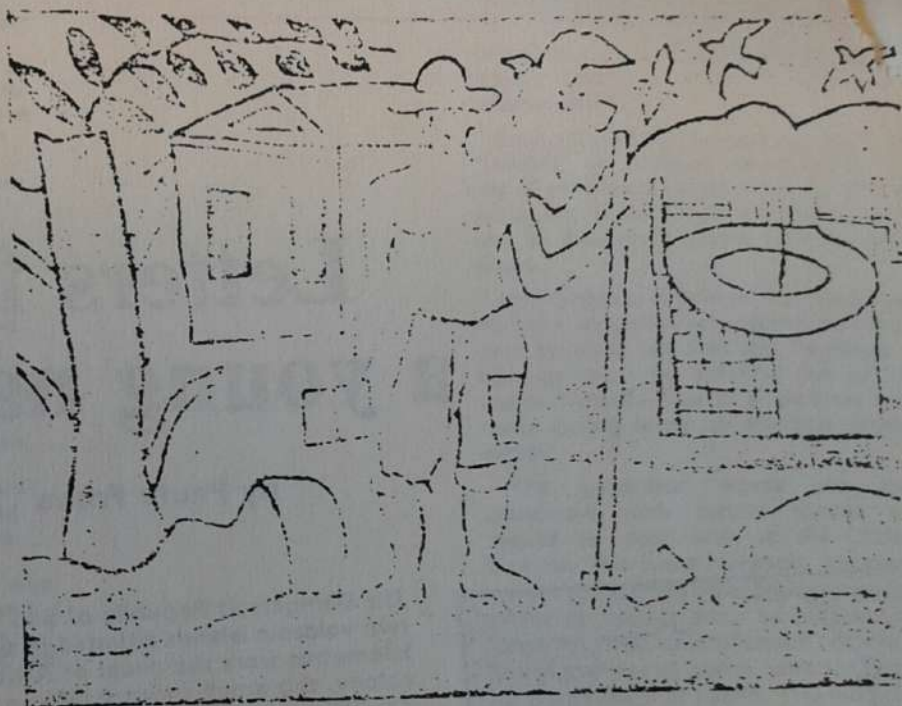
PAULO FREIRE, noted Brazilian educator, is the originator of a method of literacy teaching which has attracted widespread attention. He developed this system, which is based on encouraging adults to become "critically conscious" of their situation, in Brazil, Chile and other Latin American countries. Formerly professor of history and philosophy of education at the university of Recife (Brazil) and a visiting professor at Harvard, he has also worked with the United Nations and Unesco. He is now a consultant with the World Council of Churches in Geneva. Among his published works in English translation are: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Penguin, London, 1972), *Education for Critical Consciousness* (Sheed and Ward, London, 1974) and *Education and the Practice of Freedom* (Writers and Readers Publishing Co-operative, London).

In São Tomé and Príncipe our most urgent need is for clear-thinking militants

way to literacy and the group leaders jointly "read and write their own reality, thinking critically about their world, becoming more aware and integrating themselves more fully in a real situation which is being transformed". And so it is of paramount importance that we should not remain at the "b and a equals ba" stage but should slowly, together with the comrades who are learning with us, come to a "reading", a "new reading" of our experience. Another consequence of this approach is that we must relate literacy teaching to production and health, and link it whenever we can with concrete community action programmes.

Since we conceive of literacy teaching as a cultural activity in favour of the reconstruction of our country and not simply as training pupils how to read and write, we may find in some parts of the country that our work with the people has to focus initially on a "reading", "rereading" and "writing" of reality and not on language learning.

This means that in certain situations the crucial thing is to organize the people in groups and discuss with them their real experience, always in terms of down-to-earth activities; to analyse local conditions with them and find solutions to some of their problems in such fields as health and production — to encourage them to organize themselves, for example, around a community work project, a collective farm. And the act of "reading", "rereading" and "writing" their own experience in this way may induce them to want to read and write words as well, acquiring a skill which comes to possess a real meaning for them.



In other instances, cultural action begins with literacy teaching *per se*. In these cases the literacy teaching should be a kind of launching pad for a determined effort to create projects in which the people can make an impact on the local situation. A dynamic relationship is thus established between the educational work of the culture groups and the down-to-earth task of transforming a real-life situation; each activity is vitalized and revitalized by the other.

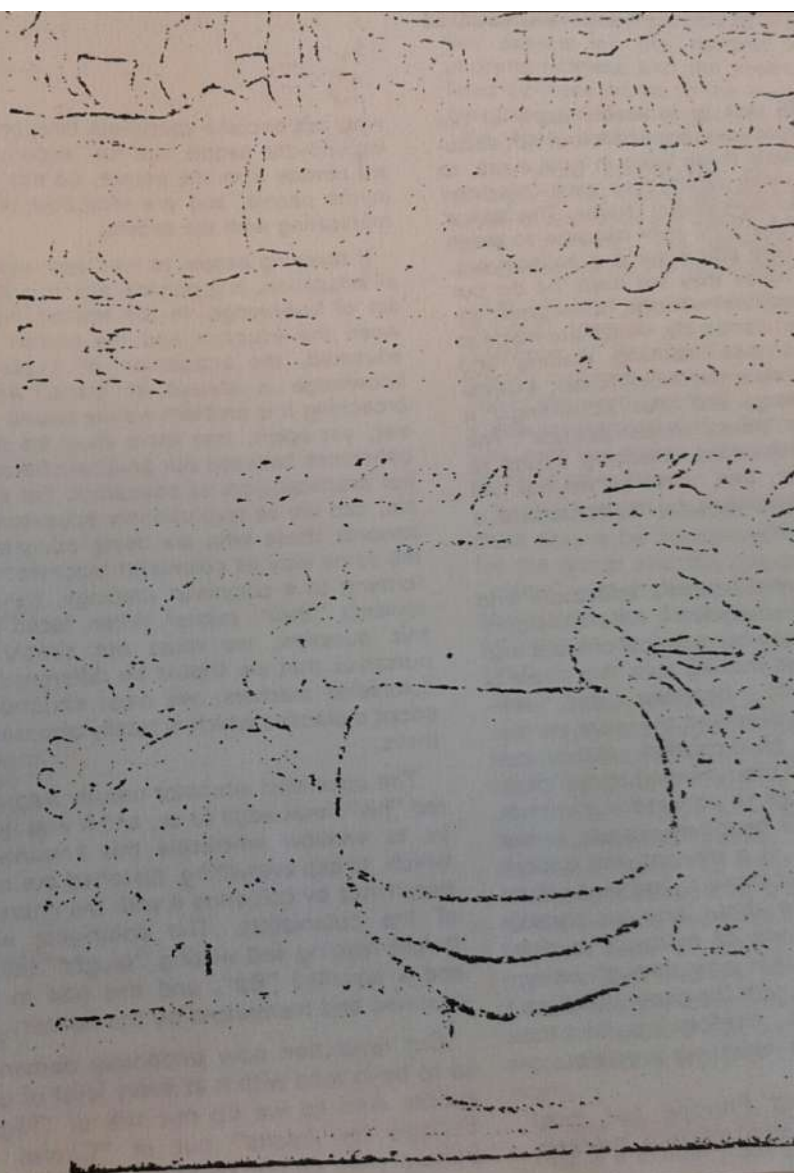
Now I should like to raise a number of points which, when explained, will help us to understand what the Culture Groups should do. These points can be summed up in three terms: the "generator word", "codification", and "decodification".

A *generator word* is one which, chosen in accordance with certain criteria, can be broken down into component syllables which when combined enable other words to be formed. If, for example, we take the word *MATABALA*, the name of a root vegetable widely cultivated in Sao Tomé, and break it down into its syllables, we obtain:

ma, me, mi, mo, mu
ta, te, ti, to, tu
ba, be, bi, bo, bu
la, le, li, lo, lu

We call each group of syllables a "family"; hence we have the ma, me, mi, mo, mu family; the ta, te, ti, to, tu family, etc.

Using these four families, a series of words can be created, such as: *mata* (tuft of grass); *mate* (maté, infusion); *meta* (goal, objective); *mimo* (pampering), *lata* (tin); *tela* (cloth, fabric); *tomo* (I take); *tomate* (tomato); *tema* (theme); *cola* (tail); *libelo*



Learning to read is a political act and constitutes a step towards full participation in the life of the community. Men and women, whether literate or not, are creators of culture. Some of the conditions in which people live are man-made and can therefore be changed. The difference between nature and culture is based on the distinction between man and the other animals, and in this distinction oral and written language plays an important role. These are some of the principles which form the basis of the method of adult education originated by Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator and sociologist. Working in Recife (Brazil) Freire was instrumental in creating a number of "Circles of Culture" whose members, aided by a series of ten pictures and without any written material, were encouraged to analyse the realities of their lives (in a process which Freire called "conscientization") and to become aware that they could transform the situation in which they lived. Reproduced on these pages are four of the pictures, the work of the Brazilian artist Francisco Brennand. Left: an image designed to show a basic distinction between nature and culture. The co-ordinator of the Circle of Culture asked questions such as: Who made the well? Why did he do so? Who made the house? the hoes? the book? Who made the tree? the pig? the birds? In what way is the tree different from the well? Gradually the discussion moved to the conclusion that people use natural materials to change their situation and create culture. Members of the circle knew the distinction but the discussion taught

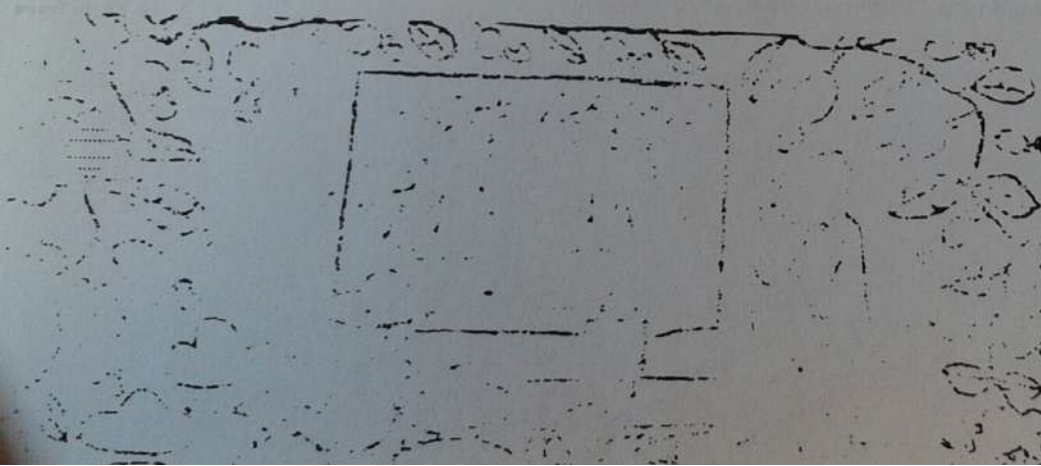
(pamphlet); *batuta* (orchestra conductor's baton); *bebo* (I drink); *batata* (sweet potato); and so on.

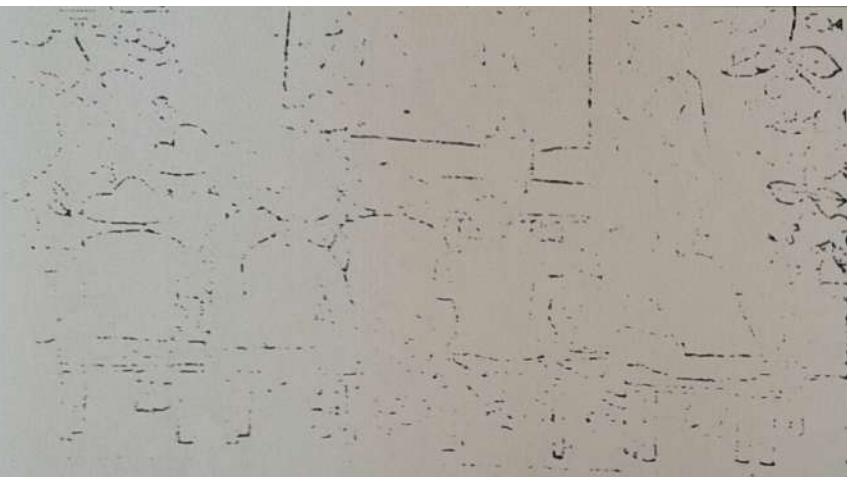
But it should be stressed that where these "families" of syllables are concerned, the role of the Group Leader is not to form the words but to encourage the persons on the way to literacy to create them for themselves.

Nevertheless, whenever the group leader notices that the learners seem to be hanging back because they feel shy, he should encourage them by creating two or three words himself. This is a common occurrence during work on the first generator words.

The generator words are always associated with certain themes which should be dealt with in the Circles of Culture. The word *matabala*, for example, can be the starting point for discussions on a series of themes such as production, the need for crop diversification, or the nutritional qualities of plants, which in turn leads to the problem of health. This question, like that of production, can and should broaden out into a political analysis concerning, for example, the conscious participation of the people in boosting production and in health care.

The generator words are not chosen at random but in accordance with certain criteria such as thematic richness, in other words the variety of themes to which they refer and which can be connected with local experience of those on the way to literacy and make it possible to analyse certain aspects of the national situation. The phonetic richness and the possibilities offered by these words to the learners who are overcoming difficulties such as the sound combinations *LHA*, *NHA*, double *s*, double *r*, and so on.





them — to clarify it. The second discussion, prompted by picture above-left, concerned the relationship between people. People can create culture, whereas animals cannot, and people can communicate extensively with each other. The natural world is real and can be known through investigation and dialogue. Communication should take place as a dialogue between equals. Picture at left illustrates the transformation of nature into culture. Not only has the clay been transformed into a vase but flowers, which in the field are part of nature, have been changed into culture by the person who arranged them. In this picture a "graphic symbol" is introduced for the first time, in the drawing of flowers which decorates the vase. Nature, transformed into culture, has been transformed once again, this time into a written symbol. The last of the ten pictures (above) enabled the group to look at itself and reflect on its own activity. It shows a Circle of Culture at work and the members could easily identify it as representing themselves. The function of the Circle was examined: what the experience signified, what dialogue was, what it meant to develop one's consciousness. By now the participants had gained great confidence and pride in their culture, and the desire to learn to read. The next stage was literacy teaching in the strict sense (see verleaf).

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The word *codification*, put in in its simplest terms, means the graphic representation of reality, as in a poster, a photograph or a film strip. The generator word is superimposed on the codification.

Let us take as an example the word *PUEBLO* (people) as given in the *First Notebook of Popular Culture*, a guide for literacy teachers and learners. The codification of the word *PUEBLO* is a photograph of a popular demonstration on Independence Day, with the people gathered in the square which is now theirs.

It should be stressed that codification must always be considered as a challenge for the group and the group leader, as an "object" which must be analysed by the group with the participation of the leader, and not as an aid which he "gives to his class".

Decodification is the act of analysing the poster or photograph. Decodifying a graphic representation of certain aspects of the real world gives us a "reading" of reality. The group leader plays an important and sensitive role in this process. He must not be too self-effacing, nor must he intervene too much; decodification is a dialogue in which all the learners are involved. While respecting the way in which the group comprehends the meaning of its experience, he should also provoke debate so that both he and the learners can together progress to more complex ways of understanding their world.

It now becomes apparent that a culture group is a school—but a school with a dif-

ference—in which there are neither teachers, nor pupils, nor lessons in the traditional sense. The culture group is not a centre for the diffusion of knowledge but a place—a school hall, a room in a house, a shady spot under a tree, or a cabin built by the community—where a group of comrades meet to discuss what they do at work, the local and national situation and also in certain cases to read and write.

In this "school with a difference" the traditional type of teacher who talks and then makes the pupil illustrate and repeat what he has said, is replaced by the culture group leader, who should be a militant who sees things clearly. Instead of the passive pupil, the "illiterate" who is on the receiving end of the teacher's lessons, there is someone who is on the way to literacy, someone who is as much a participant in the group's activities as its leader. Instead of reading primers, which the pupils have to illustrate with drawings and repeat from memory, we have *generator themes* referred to by *generator words*, both themes and words being depicted in the "codifications".

Now let us look for a few moments at the work of the culture group leader. First of all,

since his or her task as an educator has a political dimension and is not that of the teacher who gives purely technical instruction in reading and writing from a supposedly neutral point of view, it is not confined to debates within the group but should range widely over the life of the district, farm or village in which the group meets. The more deeply the leader identifies with the people, the better he or she performs his or her political-educational task.

It may help the leader if he gets into the habit of jotting down in a notebook things that attract his attention in the area where the group meets. He should also make a point of noting down salient points from the group's discussions. These notes will be of great help in day-to-day work and will be extremely valuable when it comes to the evaluation seminars which we shall have to hold with everyone.

Another possibility is for the group leader to present from time to time as discussion topics some of the observations he has made during the group's sessions, as well as impressions drawn from his experience within the community. However, it is essen-

tial to avoid any comments of a personal nature and he must be sure not to lose the respect he should feel for the people. When presenting one of his observations to the group, the leader should act as someone who is questioning himself and trying to learn; he should not hold forth about what he has noted down. This does not mean, however, that he should not also express his way of seeing things.

While the group leader should not allow the group's activities to revolve around him, he should not be the only one to have a say, nor always have the last word and give the impression that he knows all the answers, neither should he be reserved and self-effacing.

Both the group leader and "those on the way to literacy" must be active participants in the culture group. In the political perspective which is ours, in accordance with the principles of our movement, it is not the leader's role either to manipulate the learners or to leave them to their own devices. In other words we should try to steer a middle course between control and spontaneity.

■ Paulo Freire

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Literacy in 30 hours

Paulo Freire believes that adults can learn to read rapidly as long as reading is not part of a "cultural imposition" on them and that teaching is rooted in the daily life of the community. He and his colleagues discovered that no more than 17 words (which they call "generator words") were necessary as a basis for teaching adults to read Portuguese and Spanish. According to Freire's method, which has been practised in Brazil and other Latin American countries, as well as Sao Tomé and Príncipe, the ideas represented by these words must be critically discussed before the words themselves are analysed as "graphic symbols". And so a picture was prepared to illustrate each word. In the case of the word *tijolo* ("brick" in Portuguese) the picture (called a "codification" in Freire's terminology) depicted a construction scene. At first the picture was shown without the word *tijolo*. Only after the group had taken part in a discussion (the process which Freire calls "decodification") on building with bricks, their own houses, and housing as a community problem, was a second picture introduced which showed the construction scene together with the word *tijolo* (above). In the third picture the word *tijolo* appeared alone. The same procedure was followed for the 16 other words. The adults learned to read in 30 to 40 hours.