Gottlieb on Amado, 'Creole Language, Democracy, and the Illegible State in Cabo Verde'

Amado, Abel Djassi. *Creole Language, Democracy, and the Illegible State in Cabo Verde*. : Lexington Books, 2023. xii + 227 pp. $105.00 (cloth), ISBN 9781666922677.

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Political scientists tend to specialize in subjects that are obviously political. Institutional structures and positions that conventionally wield power—government agencies, businesses, politicians—are generally their stock-in-trade. When it comes to language, that's typically the purview of linguists and linguistic anthropologists. Thus, as a political scientist, Abel Djassi Amado has gone out on a limb with this book. Reaching across unlikely disciplinary aisles to marry linguistic theory with political science, he has produced a *tour de force*.

Cabo Verde is unique in multiple ways. Uninhabited when Portugal-backed explorers first encountered the islands in 1460, the archipelago soon became the site of what some historians view as the world's first truly "creolized" population. The people who became Cabo Verdean were forged from unions—some voluntary, some violent—between diverse groups of people, including kidnapped Africans; Portuguese (and other European) traders, refugees, and prisoners; and assorted sailors and other travelers passing through the islands. For some 150 years, the archipelago also served as the initial center of what developed into a world-altering system of transatlantic human trafficking.

In this context, island residents suffered through multiple forms of oppression based on race, religion, citizenship, poverty, and gender. To enslavement, anti-Semitism, and colonial exploitation were added successive waves of drought and other assorted environmental catastrophes. In this cultural and political cauldron, a new language developed—based largely on the Portuguese lexicon but incorporating some vocabulary from Mandinga, Wolof, and other languages that enslaved Africans brought with them to the islands), as well as from Ladino, the language brought by Iberian Jews fleeing the Inquisition.[1] The developing Creole incorporated grammatical features from all these sources, suggesting that fifteenth-century Portuguese was, itself, in flux, hence native Portuguese speakers themselves participated as "agents of creolization."[2] Allowing people to communicate with each other, and across lines of class, race, and religion, this Creole language has continued to develop dynamically across the past five-and-a-half or so centuries, with significant dialectical variations and political implications across the islands and in the diaspora.[3]

Today, that language—alternately referred to as Cape Verdean *Kriolu* (or Creole)/CVC, the Cabo Verdean Language, or simply *Kriolu*—remains the first language learned by children on the islands and a preferred means of communication among most Cape Verdeans both in the archipelago and in the now-global diaspora. As a result, the language serves as a key source of identity both on and off the islands. Katherine Carter and Judy Aulette characterize Kriolu as "the language of daily life in Cape Verde, meant for family and informal situations, including jokes, songs, stories, proverbs, and feelings and emotions."[4] Nevertheless, the national government has yet to fully legitimize the language as official or to sanction its broad use in governmental and educational institutions. Instead, the official language in such "formal" contexts remains Portuguese—the language imposed by the colonial state from its first efforts in colonizing the islands.

Why would a government deny its population respect for their native language? Now, that sounds like a question that would capture the interest of a political scientist such as Amado. It turns out, language policy isn't as "soft" as the "soft power" invoked nowadays by some theorists. In fact, there is plenty of violence enacted in this language policy, even if this violence takes forms beyond somatic harm. The observations of anthropologist Luís Batalha from 2007 still seem relevant: "Although the postcolonial political elite has vowed to make Creole the national language, in practice little has so far been done. It seems that the postcolonial elite are still held hostage by the old prejudices about Creole-speaking that emerged during centuries of colonialism."[5]

Amado spends some time tracing the past 130 years of language use on the islands. The first chapter focuses on language policy during the late colonial and early postcolonial periods, from the 1890s to the 1980s, while the second chapter highlights major developments from 1991 to 2022. Chapter 3, "The International Politics of the Portuguese Language," examines global influences on the island nation, juxtaposing the historical staying power of the imperial language of Portuguese with the increasingly global language of English. Chapter 4, "Diaspora and the Language and Politics Nexus," examines the role of diasporic Cape Verdeans across Europe, the United States, and elsewhere in engaging with language policy and practice on the islands. Introducing the intriguing notion of "sociolinguistic remittances" as a subset of remittances that "constitute the transfer of ideas, values, and beliefs regarding language" is a creative contribution offered by this chapter (p. 98). Here, too, Amado focuses on the variety of ways that diasporic Cape Verdeans in New England continue to use Kriolu not only in their daily lives but also as a "tool for political mobilization" (p. 105). For those unfamiliar with the significant role played by Kriolu in public education in Massachusetts since the 1980s, this chapter will be revelatory.[6]

Chapter 5, "The Illegible State in Cabo Verde," articulates the basic argument of the book. At the heart of Amado's argument lies the claim that the Cabo Verdean government intentionally uses language policy to remain opaque. That is, in insisting on disseminating nearly all government communications and most

educational materials in Portuguese, while fully aware that the majority of citizens are far from fluent in this language, the government has, essentially, rendered itself "illegible." And a lack of "legibility" is a first step toward a lack of accountability. In short, there is an undeniable power dynamic at work here, and a scholar trained in the disciplinary tools of political science is well positioned to dissect them.

And dissect them Amado does. As a Cabo Verdean himself, Amado is, moreover, keenly attentive to these power differentials. Marrying his political scientist's attention to power differentials to a deep engagement with the tools of sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology—and, when helpful, with work by scholars in allied fields as well, including history, sociology, and law—Amado thoughtfully and creatively analyzes a range of contexts where language policy shapes human experience. Political scientists often rely on a top-down approach that prioritizes decisions made by elites but elude the daily experience of the people who live out the implications of those elites' policies. Amado's special gift is to engage both a top-down approach that analyzes government policy (buttressed with robust archival research) with a bottom-up approach that engages the quotidian experience of people living with such policy (founded on interviews and focus groups). Drawing from the ethnographer's tool kit, Amado has been pursuing this research for short and long periods between 2010 and 2022. Six focus groups with six participants each—recruited to highlight diversity in age, education, gender, and place of residence (across several islands)—provided key data from ordinary citizens, but Amado also interviewed ten elites as well as some "language activists" to understand top-down power dynamics. Combined with archival research and discourse analysis, the result is a model of interdisciplinary engagement at both methodological and theoretical levels.

My favorite chapters are the last two. In chapter 6, "Language Policy and Political Participation," Amado highlights what he terms the "politics of ridicule." Here, he sensitively reports on ordinary people's alienating encounters with Portuguese and the emotional effects of the government stigmatizing its citizens' first language. In chapter 7, "The Politics of Linguistic Landscape," Amado offers an especially nuanced analysis of electioneering, including not only flyers and billboards disseminated by aspiring politicians but also subversive swag, such as redesigned T-shirts, that produce "transgressive electoral discourse"—in part by invoking English rather than Portuguese as the European language of choice (p. 173). A brief concluding chapter summarizes and highlights the implications of the foregoing pages for undermining the nation's democratic ideals.

I hope the publisher makes this book available in an affordable paperback edition. It deserves to be read widely by students in political science, linguistic anthropology, and African studies; in doctoral classes across the social sciences, it would serve well as a model of interdisciplinary scholarship.

Notes

[1]. On languages that Africans brought with them, see, for example, Jürgen Lang, "Centre africain et Périphérie portugaise dans le Créole santiagais du Cap Vert?," in *Degrees of Restructuring in Creole Languages*, ed. Ingrid Neumann-Holzschuh and Edgar W. Schneider (John Benjamins, 2000), 469-80; and Nicolas Quint, "African Words and Calques in Capeverdean Creole (Santiago Variety)," in *Black Through White: African Words and Calques Which Survived Slavery in Creoles and Transplanted European Languages*, ed. Angela Bartens and Philip Baker (Battlebridge Publications, 2012), 3-29.

[2]. On the development of Creole, see, for example, Lang, "Centre africain"; and Isabel P. B. Fêo Rodrigues, "Grammars of Faith for Unruly Speakers: Creolization and the Transmission of Portuguese in Cabo Verde," in "Lusophoning Mande Studies: Perspectives from the Cape Verde Islands and Their 550-Year Diaspora," ed. Alma Gottlieb, special issue, *Mande Studies* 17 (2015): 5-29.

[3]. Ambrizeth Helena Lima, “Continuum and Variation in Creoles: Out of Many Voices, One Language,” *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages* 30 (2014): 225-64; Derek Pardue, *Cape Verde, Let's Go: Creole Rappers and Citizenship in Portugal* (University of Illinois Press, 2015); and Fernanda Pratas, “New Paths of Contact and Variation: Background and Design for a Future Study of Capeverdean in New England,” *Journal of Ibero-Romance Creoles* 9, no. 1 (2019): 225-50.

[4]. Katherine Carter and Judy Aulette, “Creole in Cape Verde: Language, Identity and Power,” *Ethnography* 10, no. 2 (2009): 217.

[5]. Luís Batalha, “The Politics and Symbolics of Cape Verdean Creole,” in *Creole Societies in the Portuguese Colonial Empire*, ed. Philip J. Havik and Malyn Newitt (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 78.

[6]. Carla D. Martin, “‘Nos Lingua, Nos Kultura, Nos Identidadi’: Postcolonial Language Planning and Promotion in Cabo Verde and the Cape Verdean Diaspora,” in *African Islands: Leading Edges of Empire and Globalization*, ed. Toyin Falola, R. Joseph Parrott, and Danielle Porter Sanchezm (University of Rochester Press, 2019), 208-42.

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