



Popular education, culture and democracy: reflections on the peasant popular university of Timor-Leste

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ABSTRACT

Introduction/Objective: This text seeks to think on the Fulidaidai-Slulu Institute of Economics, understanding it as a popular peasant university in Timor-Leste through the relationship between Popular Education, culture and democracy. **Methodology:** It is noteworthy that the present reflection was only possible due to my experience with the construction of the curriculum of this peasant university, when I carried out activities with Brazilian Cooperation in the East Timorese country (2013), and in a second moment, in 2017, when I worked as a professor at the institute as an activity for the part of my doctorate at the National University of Timor Lorosa'e. **Results/Conclusion:** Regarding the results and conclusions, it is noteworthy that, in the absence of a disconnect between the training of labor and human training, the institute puts into practice Popular Education as an expression of rebel culture, acting alongside the process of raising awareness among peasants, the members of the Peasants Union of Ermera (UNAER) are also protagonists in this educational process, acting in the dissemination and development of an economy and technology linked to another societal model (democratic).

KEYWORDS

Popular education. University. Peasantry. Timor-Leste.

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Educação popular, cultura e democracia: reflexões acerca da universidade popular camponesa do Timor-Leste

RESUMO

Introdução/Objetivo: O presente texto busca refletir sobre o Instituto de Economia *Fulidaidai-Slulu*, compreendendo-o como uma universidade popular camponesa do Timor-Leste por meio da relação entre Educação Popular, cultura e democracia. **Metodologia:** Destaca-se que a presente reflexão apenas foi possível em função de minha experiência junto à construção do currículo dessa universidade camponesa, quando, em 2013, realizei atividades junto à Cooperação Brasileira no país leste-timorense, e num segundo momento, em 2017, quando atuei como docente do instituto como atividade do meu doutorado sanduíche junto a Universidade Nacional de Timor *Lorosa'e*. **Resultados/Conclusão:** Acerca dos resultados e conclusões, destaca-se que, não havendo uma desvinculação entre formação de mão de obra e formação humana, o instituto põe em prática a Educação Popular como expressão da cultura rebelde, atuando junto ao processo de conscientização dos camponeses, sendo que os próprios membros da União dos Agricultores de Ermera (UNAER) são também protagonistas desse processo educativo, atuando na disseminação e desenvolvimento de uma economia e de uma tecnologia ligada a outro modelo societário (democrático).

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Educação popular. Universidade. Campesinato. Timor-Leste.

Educación popular, cultura y democracia: reflexiones sobre la universidad popular campesina de Timor-Leste

RESUMEN

Introducción/Objetivo: Este texto busca reflexionar sobre el Instituto de Economía *Fulidaidai-Slulu*, entendiéndolo como una universidad popular campesina en Timor-Leste a través de la relación entre Educación Popular, cultura y democracia. **Metodología:** Es de destacar que la presente reflexión solo fue posible por mi experiencia con la construcción del currículo de esta universidad campesina, cuando en 2013 realicé actividades con la Cooperación Brasileña en el país de Timor Oriental, y en un segundo momento, en 2017, cuando trabajé como profesora en el instituto como actividad para mi doctorado sándwich en la Universidad Nacional de Timor *Lorosa'e*. **Resultados/Conclusión:** En cuanto a los resultados y conclusiones, se destaca que, ante la ausencia de una desconexión entre la formación del trabajo y la formación humana, el instituto pone en práctica la Educación Popular como expresión de la cultura rebelde, actuando paralelamente al proceso de sensibilización de los campesinos, Los miembros de la Unión de Agricultores de Ermera (UNAER) también son protagonistas de este proceso educativo, actuando en la difusión y desarrollo de una economía y tecnología ligada a otro modelo social (democrático).

PALABRAS CLAVE

Educación popular. Universidad. Campesinado. Timor-Leste.

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1 Introduction

This essay is the result of reflections about the relation between education, culture, and democracy, having as background a popular education experience that I have been carrying out since 2013, when I worked, for the first time, together, with the main social movement of the countryside of Timor-Leste, the Union of Farmers of Ermera (UNAER), in the construction of a popular countryside university, called Fulidaidai-Slulu Economics Institute.

It is worth mentioning that this activity was only possible through the promotion of educational cooperation from a South-South perspective, at a time when Brazilian foreign policy was totally different from the current one, through the Program for Teacher Qualification and Portuguese Language Teaching, promoted by the CAPES/UFSC partnership.

Still with regard to the experience with the peasants of Timor-Leste, in 2017, through the Pro-International Mobility program (AULP/CAPES), as a sandwich doctoral student at the National University of Timor Lorosa'e, I had the opportunity to continue the research started in 2013, as a lecturer at the Fulidaidai-Slulu Institute of Economics (IEFS).

Thus, this text aims to reflect theoretically about the relationship between culture, popular education, and democracy, presenting IEFS as a practical application of this relationship, in the possibility of building another possible world.

2 Considerations about anti-popular education

To start the conversation, we must ask the following question: why talk about Popular Education and not only about Education?

Briefly, the need to reaffirm Popular Education is due to the fact that school education, more broadly, especially nowadays, has stood out for its anti-popular character.

I speak here of school education, because, as Martins (2016, p. 45) states, "It is one of the forms that education assumed in a certain historical context", but "[...] tended (and tends) to absorb all the educational function". (SAVIANI, 2009 apud MARTINS, 2016, p. 45).

About its educational process, this anti-popular educational perspective is characterized by the mechanical act of depositing knowledge in students, who are considered mere receivers of information (FREIRE, 2010, p. 15-17), as well as for not having social practice as a starting point, thus disregarding a whole multiplicity of experiential knowledge of individuals, generating what Santos and Meneses (2009, p. 11) present as "decontextualized universality".

The latter refers to the idea that modern science is the only valid and possible knowledge for all societies in the world.

About this, contrary to this universal character of knowledge, Gramsci (2001, p. 205) states that "A quite common error is to believe that every social layer elaborates its own consciousness, its own culture in the same way, with the same methods, that is, with the methods of professional intellectuals."

For Silva (2016), based on Freire (1987, 2010), we have here the great contradiction of bourgeois society: the attempt to homogenize culture, adopting only Western culture as the only and true one, with the aim of legitimizing inequalities. In this sense, Santos, and Menezes (2009, p. 13) state that the "dominant Western epistemology was built on the basis of the needs of colonial domination and is based on the idea of an abyssal thinking," which has as its procedure the refusal of world experiences in function of the defense of world experimentation¹ (SANTOS, 2018, p. 26)

In practical terms, about this anti-popular education, one has contents disconnected from the reality of the learners, highlighting the famous questioning presented by Freire (2010, p. 17) in relation to Youth and Adult Education: "What significance (...), can have, for men and women, (...) who spend a hard day of work or, even harder, without work, texts like these, which must be memorized: 'Wing is of the bird'; 'Eve saw the grape' (...)?"

And what is the purpose of this anti-popular education?

For Gramsci (1989, 2002), since school is the mechanism of maintenance of bourgeois ideology, that is, the political hegemony of the dominant bourgeois class, education aims to reproduce its class ideology, as well as patriarchy and colonialism, if we add Santos (2019) contributions.

Martins (2016, p. 54) states that (anti-popular) educational actions are carried out from "the perspective of the conservation of social relations, as they aim to educate individuals and social groups to integrate harmonically into reality, not recognizing the contradictions present."

In other words, according to Freire (2010, p. 17), the aim is to form "(...) passive and docile beings, since this is how they are seen and how they are treated, the students must go on receiving that alienating 'transfusion' from which, for this very reason, no contribution to the process of transforming reality can result." Based on Gramsci (1989, p. 136-137), it is possible to say that this model, far from being democratic, reaffirmed the perpetuation of social classes.

¹ Like a scientific experiment.

The opposite of this is Popular Education, that is, an education as an expression of a Rebel Culture, referring to resistance and counter-hegemonic construction in the perspective of the autonomy of the subjects in the historical process (BRANDÃO, ASSUMPÇÃO, 2009).

Thus, it is because of the need to transform reality that it is necessary to reaffirm Popular Education as a viable path to another possible world, understanding it as a "process of knowledge production, aimed at freedom and democracy, which refuses the authoritarianism, manipulation and ideologization reproduced in the logic of market education. (STRECK et al., 2014, p. 49).

3 Popular Education: expression of the rebel culture

Popular Education, in the perspective that I bring here, is not self-help, nor does it aim at the formation of deeply competitive, individualistic social actors, focused on a project of life fulfillment through competition in the search for "success".

I bring this up because the concept of Popular Education, present in Paulo Freire's works, has often been emptied in the sense of a romanticization unconcerned with social causes, which is due, above all, to the exclusion of the class divide.

In opposition to this, Brandão and Assumpção (2009, p. 94) state:

Now, popular education claims to conspire against this. It claims to be 'another viable education'. Yes, another conception, an alternative. A multiple project, but convergent in being that of an education frankly opposed to all creation of persons, vocations, and identities ruled by the market.

In this same perspective, Brandão and Assumpção (2009) add by presenting this conception of education as an expression of a Rebel Culture, through "A radicality understood in the etymological sense of the word: referring to the root, the origin; in the case of popular education, referring to resistance and counter-hegemonic construction in the perspective of the autonomy of the subjects in the historical process". (BRANDÃO, ASSUMPÇÃO, 2009, p. 47).

And how is it possible to think culture, education, and democracy in this perspective of rebellion?

In the work "Intellectuals and the Organization of Culture", by Antonio Gramsci (1989), the author presents the definition of intellectual, in relation to culture, as being the member of a social group and all social masses that act in the organization of culture. The latter is the fruit of pedagogical actions.

Thus, still according to Gramsci (1989), it is possible to think about the organic intellectual as being that member of a certain group, who contributes to the formation of new political intellectuals and will participate in the counter-hegemonic cultural formation (rebel culture), in the perspective of another possible world.

In this sense, Brandão and Assumpção (2009, p. 70) state that this rebel culture aims to develop a fully democratic culture, that is:

A culture that affirms the primacy of recognition and freedom among men and that, being at first a class culture - of the popular classes -, later becomes the culture that opens itself to the unveiling of the end of antagonistic relations between social classes. (BRANDÃO, ASSUMPCÃO, 2009, p. 70).

Democracy, understood, according to Chauí (2008), through the popular power of the citizens, in the search for the construction of a truly historical society. And this is linked to the need to:

Reinvention of power, capable of building in history a society with full solidarity, in which culture has a double role. That of being, during the process of its construction, a critical instance of effective democratization of symbols, values, and meanings of social life. That of being, in its full realization, the symbolic evidence itself of free and egalitarian communication among all people (BRANDÃO, ASSUMPCÃO, 2009, p. 82).

And how would this educational process take place?

To answer this question, I start here from the writings of Gramsci (1989), in line with Popular Education from the perspective of Rebellious Culture (BRANDÃO, ASSUMPCÃO, 2009).

According to Gramsci (1989), it is necessary that education, in this case Popular Education, forms organic intellectuals of the working class, in the struggle for a counter-hegemony, that is, for a counterculture. The latter can also be interpreted as rebel culture (BRANDÃO, ASSUMPCÃO, 2009).

And this happens through what Gramsci (apud BARBOSA, 2004) calls philosophy of praxis, that is, "as an instrument to overcome an uncritical conception of the world, based on elements extracted from common sense. (BARBOSA, 2004, p. 102-103). Common-sense here understood through social practice.

More specifically, Popular Education is intended to work the knowledge that historically has been systematized by men and women (GOHN, 2011), including here the popular knowledge, those linked to the "cognitive practice of human bodies fighting and struggling, resisting and having hope". (FREIRE, NOGUEIRA, 2014, p. 42).

In other words, Popular Education is based on "existing knowledges in the world and, at the same time, anchoring the reflection on them in their situated character and in the local and situated conditions of the validity of each of them, gauged from their consequences." (NUNES, 2009, p. 226).

Based on Santos (2018, p. 24), we can say that Popular Education links to the recognition and validation of "knowledge produced, or to be produced, by those who have systematically suffered injustices, oppression, domination, exclusion, caused by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy, the three main modes of modern domination."

It is considered, in this meaning, that popular educational practices are carried out based on the dialogical perspective itself, "whose pedagogy intends to dissolve the vertical structure of teaching". (BRANDÃO, ASSUMPÇÃO, 2009, p. 53). It is worth pointing out that I start here from the understanding of dialog as a positioning that one has before knowledge, involving positions of thesis and antithesis in the relationship between educator and student, but that this difference does not determine a hierarchy, because what we have are collective constructions of new knowledge. Dialog, then, is a philosophical position in relation to knowledge and the social role of education (SILVA, 2016).

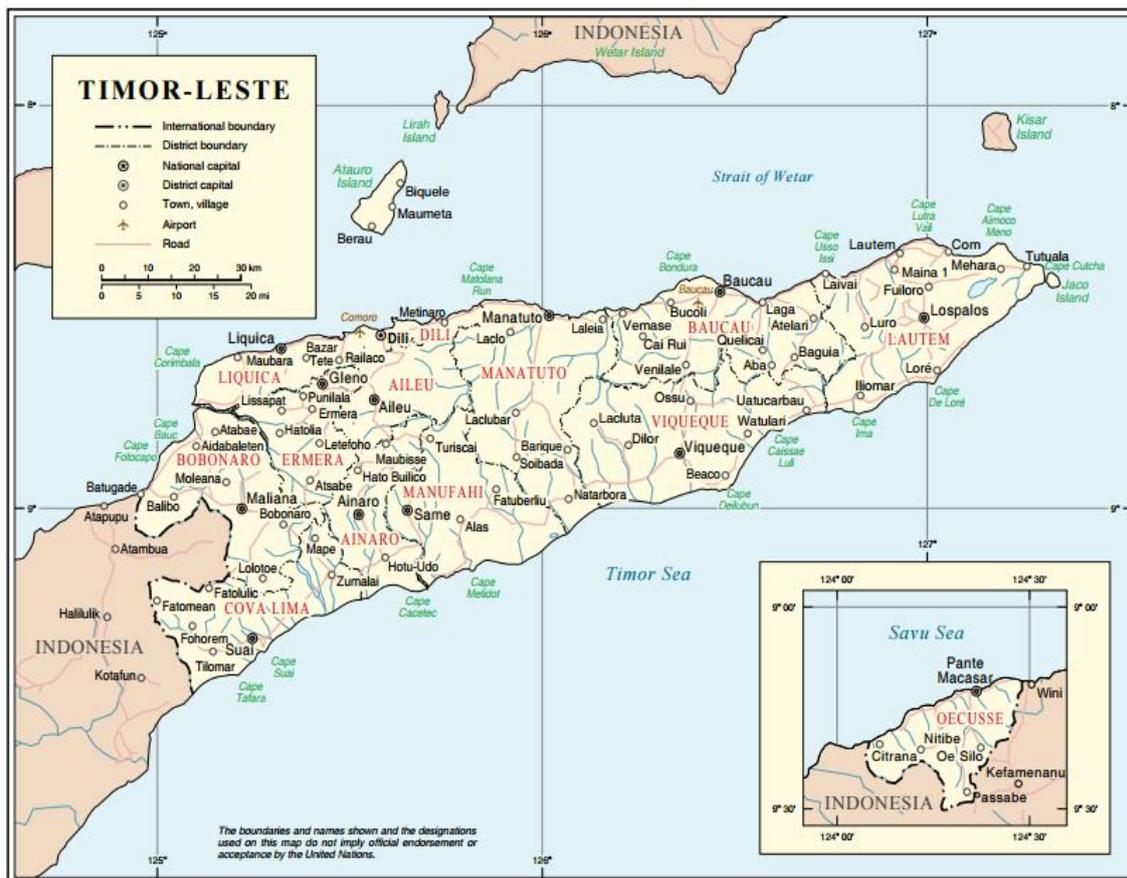
4 Popular Education: experience of another possible world

As already pointed out in the introduction of this essay, I will present here a popular education experience in East Timor, more specifically about the curriculum and teacher training of the Fulidaidai-Slulu Economic Institute (IEFS), linked to the main social movement in the countryside of the Asian country, the Ermera Farmers Union (UNAER).

However, in order to present this process, it is important to briefly explain the East Timorese country.

As a starting point, it was necessary to give a brief spatial framework of the country that is the object of this research. It is located in Southeast Asia, covering a small area of approximately 15,000 km² (MAP 01).

Map 1. Political Map of Timor-Leste



Source: United Nations (2011)

The current context of Timor-Leste is the result of historical processes of invasion, in which the main agents stand out: Portugal, in the period of the Great Navigations and imperialism (1515-1975); Indonesia, in the period of the Cold War, with the United States of North America and Australia having relevant roles at this time: the former providing armaments and the latter with the interest in the oil present in the South Timor Sea (1975-1999).

After the restoration of independence, won in 2002, in opposition to centuries of oppression that manifested themselves through banking education (SILVA, 2020), as well as by the concentration of land exerted by the invading forces, the idea of forming the Ermera Farmers Union (UNAER) arises.

It is worth mentioning that the conquest for the restoration of independence in East Timor was achieved by the guerrilla resistance exerted by the Timorese, in line with popular education processes that aimed at literacy and literacy, as well as the training of paramedics to act in the midst of the guerrilla. This educational manifestation is called, by Silva (2020), as Maubere Pedagogy and was greatly influenced by Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

In 2010, there was the consolidation of the UNAER, and, since that moment, the peasants have perceived the need to build a rural school, more specifically, a university that would seek to accomplish the formation for work, at the same time that they sought to raise awareness of the struggle and the strengthening of Fulidaidai-Slulu indigenous solidarity in the formation of their own organic intellectuals.

In this sense, we observe a certain similarity with what Gramsci (1989, p. 27) presents about the unitary school in the search for the "ever greater elevation of the culture of the masses, making the elite of its intellectuals emerge from it, capable of a theoretical and practical connection," which takes place in the criticism regarding the social meaning of the Italian professionalizing school, which aimed only at preparing labor (GRAMSCI, 1989, p. 117 - 118).

Against this backdrop, the Fulidaidai-Slulu Economic Institute (IEFS) emerged with the intention of denouncing the status quo and, at the same time, building something together with the other, that is, a new form of economy established within the framework of solidarity, seeking to promote the construction or consolidation of the emancipation of those involved, especially the Maubere² people.

About the term Fulidaidai-Sululu, it should be noted that the first word Fulidaidai comes from the Makalero language, spoken in the south of the municipality of Lautém, and the word Slulu comes from the Mambai language, spoken in the municipality of Ermera. These two words, based on an indigenous solidarity from Timor-Leste, constitute the concept of Fulidaidai-Slulu economy, which means *servisu hamutuk* in the Tetum language, or joint work in the Portuguese language, carried out collectively, in cooperation, or, still, solidary work, approaching what is commonly called in Brazil as Solidarity Economy.

As already mentioned, the idea of IEFS came up when UNAER was formed, by the peasants themselves. From then on, this demand became part of the agendas of the non-governmental organization (NGO) Kdadalak Sulimutuk Institute (KSI) and the Peace and Conflict Studies Institute (Peace Center). The latter is linked to the National University of Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL³). In 2013, this demand also became part of the Brazilian Cooperation (PQLP/CAPES), and I joined these activities in November of the same year, at the invitation of Professor Dr. Antero Benedito da Silva (director of the Peace Center and Timor-Leste's greatest intellectual).

It is worth mentioning that the students graduated from this popular peasant university will be future educators at the bases of UNAER, since one of the objectives of this university is to create new similar institutes throughout the country. More specifically, the IEFS students

² People of East Timor.

³ East Timor's leading university.

will be new intellectuals, acting in the cultural organization of the community, "as political work in the struggle for social transformations, as emancipation of the subjects, democratization and social justice". (BRANDÃO, ASSUMPCÃO, 2009, p. 12).

About the construction of the IEFS curriculum, several meetings were held in which the peasants of the UNAER proposed ideas about the school, mainly concerning some issues, such as the need for a strengthening of agroecology, in the sense of Fulidaidai-Slulu (development of local practices and technologies/better management/specialized teaching), together with the struggle for agrarian reform.

It sought to think methodologically about Popular Education in the sense of a liberating conception of education, considering the autonomy of the subjects in the historical process. For this, it was necessary to consider the existence of subjects, in which both learn, including researchers, teachers, students, and the others involved with the idea of IEFS.

In this perspective, since I was not an organic member of that group, my action on the needs proposed by the peasants demanded from me, critically, the perception that the peasants have of them (FREIRE, 1981, p. 35).

Thus, the IEFS curriculum⁴ is summarized in Table 1. The curriculum is composed of subjects that aim to discuss the knowledge that has historically been systematized by men and women, in line with the knowledge of the field.

The first semester is composed of the subjects "Diversification of agriculture", "Journal writing", and "Popular Education"; the second semester is composed of the subjects "Environmental and Forestry Education", "Politics of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste", and "Fulidaidai-Slulu Economy"; the third semester is composed of the subjects "Integrated Agriculture", "Ukun rasik an Pedagogy", and "Popular Culture"; the fourth and last semester includes the following subjects: "Maubere Land Pedagogy", "Organic Fertilization" and "Agrarian Reform".

As a way to bring the practical application of what was pointed out about the proximity of the unitary school, regarding the introduction of the students to the world of things, natural sciences, and rights and duties (GRAMSCI, 1989, p. 129-130), the objectives of each discipline will be pointed out in the table below.

⁴ In more depth, both the construction of the school and its curriculum are best discussed in Urban, Silva and Linsingen (2020).

Table 1. Disciplines of the Fulidaidai-Slulu Institute of Economics and their respective goals/features

	DISCIPLINES	OBJECTIVES/CHARACTERISTICS
SEMESTER I	Diversification of agriculture	Practices about diversification of agricultural production - cultivation for sale and for the community's own consumption
	Journal Writing	To understand the current situation of access to land and other community problems through community narratives
		To reflect about past and present popular education in Timor-Leste and in the world, through methodological proposals
SEMESTER 2	Popular Education	To practice agro-ecological cultivation, considering environmental preservation together with local knowledge
	Environmental and Forestry Education	Understanding the power structures in East Timor, with a view to developing the struggles for emancipation of East Timorese peasants, in order to enforce democracy.
	Politics of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste	Based on real experiences and economic activities of the community, discuss, and develop in practice this economic solidarity manifestation, aiming at democracy.
SEMESTER 3	Fulidaidai-Slulu Economics	Development of agroecology related to the development of Social Technology
	Integrated Agriculture	To develop pedagogical, theoretical, and practical knowledge, as a continuation of the subject "Popular Education", seeking the formation of organic intellectuals, based on the popular education experiences in East Timor ⁵ .
	Pedagogy	To reflect about the Buibere and Maubere ⁶ cultures, not as static, but in a dynamic way, which constantly emerges. Also, we seek to understand the traditional knowledge of Timor-Leste related to agriculture, including the term Fulidaidai-Slulu
SEMESTER 4	Ukun rasik an	To form intellectuals from the perspective of the East Timorese ancestry, of the interrelation between nature and human beings
		To work with Social Technology, related to the fertilizing process, based on popular knowledge and on the knowledge of modern science
	Popular Culture	To organize the struggle for access and distribution of land in East Timor, using not only activism, but also reflection.

Source: Elaborated by the author

⁵ Ler Silva (2011)

⁶ Maubere refers to the male gender; Buibere to the female gender. Both mean people from Timor-Leste.

Finally, it should be noted that IEFS, in consonance with UNAER, through indigenous solidarity (Fulidaidai and Slulu), currently uses local cooperative practices, which range from the agro-ecological production of coffee and various foods to the construction of houses for the community with income from the équo solidary trade, linked above all to the export of coffee to the so-called Green Cooperatives in Japan.

Thus, its curriculum⁷ is composed by subjects that aim to discuss about the knowledge that historically has been systematized by men and women, in accordance with the knowledge of the field, aiming to "foster popular participation in the social control of public policies and in the spaces of participatory democracy". (BRANDÃO, ASSUMPÇÃO, 2009, p. 98).

5 Final considerations

Therefore, I start here that the Fulidaidai-Slulu Institute of Economics can be interpreted as a utopian university for the 21st century, in the sense of an alternative for the construction of inclusive and emancipatory knowledge and practices, which do not aim at conformation to the market, but rather the construction of another possible world, because its context of application occurs through cooperation and solidarity among researchers and non-governmental organizations, social movements (SANTOS, 2011, p. 43).

This whole process goes through the construction of a counter-hegemonic culture, that is, the construction of a rebel culture that is directly linked to another possible world, going through the construction of democracy.

Moreover, IEFS puts into practice Popular Education as an expression of the rebel culture, acting together with the peasants' awareness process. The members of the Ermera Farmers' Union (UNAER) are also protagonists of this educational process, acting in the dissemination and development of an economy and a technology linked to another societal model, and in the production of food together with the export of coffee through agro-ecological production.

Amidst so much hopelessness provided by the advance of colonialism, capitalism, and also patriarchy, the Fulidaidai-Slulu Economics Institute (IEFS) emerges as a breath of hope that, starting from the micro-political scale, can become the basis for a transformation at the macro scale.

⁷ In more depth, both the construction of the school and its curriculum are best discussed in Urban, Silva and Linsingen (2020).

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