

## Fanonian analysis of the Statute of Portuguese Indigenous Peoples in Guinea, Angola, and Mozambique (1954)

### ARTICLE

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### Abstract

The text aims to analyze the *Statute of the Portuguese Indigenous Peoples* as an expression of the Portuguese colonial rationality. Based on Fanon's critical theory, it is investigated how the Statute institutionalized racial inequality and selective citizenship through legal, symbolic and affective devices. The research adopts a qualitative approach, articulating documentary analysis, content analysis and hermeneutic-critical method. It is concluded that the Statute justified the inferiorization of Black, under the discourse of integration and progress. It operated as a tool of racial domination, reproducing the colonial logic. By regulating the work, education, language, and citizenship among colonized peoples, the Statute not only consolidated legal exclusion but also produced effects of alienation, inferiorization, and psychic violence, shaping subjectivities and restricting freedom. The Fanonian reading thus reveals that colonialism was not only expressed in the materiality of oppression, but also in the most intimate field of identity and desire.

**Keywords:** Portuguese colonialism. Statute of the Indigenous Peoples. Africanities. Human rights.

### Análise Fanoniana do estatuto dos indígenas portugueses em Guiné, Angola e Moçambique (1954)

### Resumo

O texto tem como objetivo analisar o *Estatuto dos Indígenas Portugueses* como expressão da racionalidade colonial portuguesa. Com base na teoria crítica de Fanon, investiga-se como o Estatuto institucionalizava a desigualdade racial e uma cidadania seletiva por meio de dispositivos jurídicos, simbólicos e afetivos. A pesquisa adota uma abordagem qualitativa, articulando análise documental, análise de conteúdo e método hermenêutico-crítico. Conclui-se que o Estatuto justificava a inferiorização da população negra, sob o discurso de integração e progresso. Operava como ferramenta de dominação racial, reproduzindo a lógica colonial. Ao regular o trabalho, a educação, a linguagem e a cidadania dos povos colonizados, o Estatuto não apenas consolidava a exclusão jurídica, mas também produzia efeitos de alienação, inferiorização e violência psíquica, moldando subjetividades e restringindo a liberdade. A leitura fanoniana revela, assim, que o colonialismo não se expressava apenas na materialidade da opressão, mas também no campo mais íntimo da identidade e do desejo.

**Palavras-chave:** Colonialismo português. Estatuto dos Indígenas. africanidades. Direitos Humanos.

## 1 Introduction

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The European colonial ideology was often presented as a civilizing mission, which justified the domination and exploitation of colonized peoples in the name of supposed altruism. This imaginary is exemplarily expressed in the poem by Rudyard Kipling (1899), published at the end of the nineteenth century, in which colonizers are called upon to “take up the White Man’s burden, send forth the best ye breed, go bind your sons to exile to serve your captives’ need; to wait in heavy harness on fluttered folk and wild – your new-caught, sullen peoples, half-devil and half-child.” The poem thus reveals the construction of the colonized as infantilized and demonized subjects, legitimizing the violent tutelage of the “white man” over societies seen as backward. This logic of inferiority was not limited to literature but materialized in colonial policies and laws that structured the legal, social, and cultural exclusion of millions of human beings.

In the context of Portuguese colonialism, this logic found concrete expression in the *Statute of Portuguese Indigenous People of the Provinces of Guinea, Angola, and Mozambique*, promulgated in 1954. Presented as an instrument of administrative organization and progressive integration of African peoples into the “Portuguese Nation,” the Statute concealed, beneath a veil of paternalism, a deeply exclusionary and racialized legal structure. By defining categories such as “indigenous” and “assimilated,” the Portuguese colonial state institutionalized legal and social inequality, promoting a form of selective citizenship that denied colonized subjects the same rights granted to metropolitan citizens.

This classificatory logic, according to Kabengele Munanga (2000), was one of the pillars of colonial domination, for it allowed the colonizer to establish symbolic and legal boundaries between the “civilized” and the “others.” This mental structure, rooted in scientific racism and the hierarchy of cultures, not only reproduced itself but also adapted

across different colonial territories, legitimizing exclusionary practices and the devaluation of local knowledge and ways of life.

Munanga (2000) criticizes this conception because it ignores cultural diversity and disregards the fact that each society develops specific forms of artistic expression based on its history, values, and cosmologies. By assuming that everyone shares the same aesthetic sensibility, the colonial discourse not only silences non-Western cultures but also invalidates their symbolic production as legitimate manifestations of human experience.

This logic of dehumanization and colonial hierarchy is central to the work of Frantz Fanon, a key anticolonial thinker for understanding the psychological, social, and symbolic impacts of colonialism. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008), Fanon explores the effects of colonial racism on the psyche of Black subjects, showing how oppression becomes internalized to the point of shaping identity and generating a chronic sense of inferiority. According to the author, “the Black man is looked at... the White man is the look that defines everything. From then on, the Black man feels the weight of a thousand eyes upon him: he looks at himself through the eyes of the other and sees himself as object, as stigma” (Fanon, 2008, p. 102).

In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968), Fanon deepens his critique of colonialism by showing that colonizing violence structures all spheres of life in colonial societies. As he states, “the colonial world is a compartmentalized world. It is a world cut in two, inhabited by different species. The colonized man is not considered a human being, but a kind of domesticated animal” (Fanon, 1968, p. 36).

This binary logic – colonizer versus colonized – forms the basis of legal mechanisms such as the 1954 Statute, which codify inequality and promote the subjugation of African peoples. In this sense, the *Statute of the Portuguese Indigenous People* should not be analyzed merely as a set of administrative rules, but as a material expression of the Portuguese colonial project, whose effects go beyond the legal field and are inscribed in the very constitution of the colonized subject.

In light of this, this article proposes a critical analysis of the *Statute of Portuguese Indigenous People of the Provinces of Guinea, Angola, and Mozambique* of 1954 through

the lens of Fanonian thought. It seeks to understand how the Statute reflected and reinforced the colonial logic of subalternization of African subjects under Portuguese rule, contributing to the maintenance of a system of exclusion that went beyond the legal sphere and penetrated the symbolic and subjective dimensions.

The general objective of this study is to analyze the 1954 Statute as a concrete expression of Portuguese colonialism, interpreting its provisions through Fanon's critique of structural racism and colonial domination. The specific objectives are: (1) to contextualize the emergence of the Statute within the political and ideological framework of late Portuguese colonialism; (2) to examine the normative mechanisms of exclusion and hierarchy present in its content; and (3) to apply the central concepts of Frantz Fanon's theory to interpret the psychosocial and cultural effects of the law on colonized African peoples.

## 2 Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative, theoretical-interpretive approach focused on understanding the historical and symbolic meanings of the 1954 Statute of Indigenous Peoples. According to Minayo (2014, p. 21), qualitative research is devoted to "a level of reality that cannot be quantified," making it appropriate for investigating meanings, values, and ideologies embedded in social and normative practices. In this sense, the analysis proposed here seeks to interpret the Statute's legal provisions not only as normative texts but as concrete manifestations of a regime of power and racial domination.

Document analysis is one of the central procedures of this study, with an emphasis on reading the Statute's original text and documents related to the Portuguese colonial period. As Ginzburg (1989) observes in discussing the evidential paradigm, historical documents should be treated as traces that reveal hidden structures of meaning, enabling access to the deeper logic of complex social systems such as colonialism.

Data interpretation will be guided by the hermeneutic-critical method as developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer (1999), who conceives interpretation as a dialogue between the

interpreter and the text, mediated by their historical contexts. For the author, understanding a text means “bringing forth what it says within its own historical horizon, without renouncing engagement with the questions of the present” (Gadamer, 1999, p. 365).

### **3 The emergence of the 1954 Statute in the context of Portuguese colonialism**

The promulgation of the *Statute of the Portuguese Indigenous Peoples of the Provinces of Guinea, Angola, and Mozambique* in 1954 formed part of the Portuguese state’s effort to respond to growing international pressure demanding an end to colonialism and racial segregation in African territories. With the advent of the United Nations and the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, colonial empires came under increasingly intense criticism for the systematic violation of the rights of colonized peoples. In response, colonial states such as Portugal adopted measures intended to project an image of modernization and the humanization of colonial relations, without, however, breaking with the essential structures of domination and inequality.

The Statute maintained a division between “indigenous” and “assimilated,” granting legal legitimacy to inequality and a selective form of citizenship. Despite integrative rhetoric, such categories served to reproduce the colonial logic of African inferiority, reaffirming the position of subalternity within the colonial system. This attempt at legal reform did not annul the racist and exploitative character of colonialism, it merely disguised it. Frantz Fanon, in criticizing the United Nations’ stance on racism and colonialism, observes that “at the UN there is a commission in charge of fighting racism. Films about racism, poems about racism, messages about racism. The spectacular and useless condemnations of racism. The reality is that a colonial country is a racist country” (Fanon, 1969, p. 44).

Fanon shows that symbolic condemnations, however visible, were not sufficient to dismantle the real foundations of colonial oppression. According to the author, racism is a constitutive part of the colonial system and operates as an affective and ideological rationalization of domination: “It is not possible to subjugate human beings without logically inferiorizing them from beginning to end” (Fanon, 1969, p. 45). The legal separation

between colonized bodies and metropolitan citizens, as exemplified by the Portuguese Statute, reveals the conscious maintenance of a project of exclusion. Therefore, even in the face of international discourse on equality and human rights, colonialism adapted to preserve its essential logic.

It was in this context that the 1954 Statute replaced the earlier 1929 Statute, under the argument of adapting the legal order to the new constitutional principles established in the 1951 constitutional revision and the 1953 *Organic Law of the Overseas Territories*. These changes, however, left the *indigenato* regime intact, merely attributing to it a formally transitional character. The maintenance of the distinction between “indigenous” and “citizens” revealed that, behind the legal discourse, the colonial logic persisted. As Césaire warned in his celebrated work *Discourse on Colonialism*, there was no civilization in colonialism, only domination masked as paternalism:

Colonization is not civilization, nor evangelization, nor a philanthropic enterprise, nor a work of progress, but a thing justified by one mission: to civilize the barbarians. And it is precisely this that makes colonialism an abominable thing. For all colonization implies the ‘thingification’ of the colonized. The colonizer reduces the colonized to the condition of a thing, denies him humanity (Césaire, 2007, p. 21).

The new legal clothing of the 1954 Statute did not break with the racist colonial structure. The text maintained the classification of the African population into distinct sociological categories based on their cultural “evolution,” establishing a graded system that legitimized legal inequality. During an overseas administrative training course between 1952 and 1953, Marcelo Caetano<sup>1</sup>, one of the central figures of the *Estado Novo*, divided natives into four groups: “primitive indigenous, indigenous in evolution, detribalized indigenous, and assimilated.”

Particular concern fell upon the so-called “detribalized non-assimilated,” Africans who had abandoned their traditional social structures but had not yet met the criteria required for assimilated status. For this group, the Portuguese government envisioned the need to

<sup>1</sup> Marcello José das Neves Alves Caetano was a jurist, full professor of law, and Portuguese politician. A prominent figure during the *Salazarist* regime, he was the last President of the Council of the *Estado Novo*, having been deposed by the *Carnation Revolution*.



create a specific legal status, a “middle ground” between the *indigenato* and citizenship. The proposal of intermediate statuses, such as that of “semi-assimilated,” aimed to contain these subjects’ social and political mobility, controlling their presence in colonial cities and restricting their access to full rights. In this context, the idea of indigenous neighborhoods emerged as a proposal for containment and surveillance over bodies considered dangerously “in transition.”

The rhetoric of “civilizing,” so common in colonial discourse, was the main device used to disguise the system’s structural violence. Aimé Césaire laid bare this moral farce of colonialism when he stated: “Colonization works to further dehumanize humankind, even the most civilized; to brutalize the colonizer; to turn him into a machine; to turn him into a killer. Colonization degrades the colonized, but it also degrades the colonizer, it brutalizes the mind, it poisons the soul” (Césaire, 2007, p. 39).

This critique by Césaire finds an echo in the work of Frantz Fanon, who denounced coloniality as a structure of dehumanization and objectification of the colonized subject. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon asserts that “the colonized is a being who is no longer in the world, who has lost every form of sovereignty. He is an object in the world of the colonizer” (Fanon, 1961, p. 40).

The 1954 Statute, in this sense, can be understood as one of the institutional forms of this objectification. The proposal of legal integration through assimilation entailed a renunciation of one’s own cultural identity. As Fanon emphasized, “Colonialism is not content to impose its law on the colonized people. It demands that the colonized deny themselves, forget their values, adopt the colonizer’s language and habits. Only then will they be considered ‘civilized’” (Fanon, 1961, p. 34).

The legal exclusion promoted by the Statute was not merely a juridical matter, but a profound mechanism of alienation. The colonized person was kept at the margins of the political sphere, subjected to a special legal regime that infantilized and reified him. The 1954 Statute thus represented the consolidation of a differentiated citizenship, structured upon the racialization of the other and legitimized by an ideology that masked racism with the veneer of law.

## 4 The Statute as a tool of subalternization and colonial control

The *Statute of the Portuguese Indigenous Peoples of the Provinces of Guinea, Angola, and Mozambique* was approved by Decree-Law no. 39,666 of May 20, 1954, representing one of the most explicit formulations of Portuguese colonial ideology in the context of the *Estado Novo*.

The drafting process of the Statute revealed structural and symbolic flaws. The original version omitted the mandatory consultation of the *Conselho Ultramarino*, the traditional advisory body on matters relating to the *ultramar*, which suggests not only a procedural failure but also a political intention to centralize decisions and hollow out bodies that, however symbolic, could mediate the debate. The only existing reference was a mention of an initial “project” drawn up by the Council itself, without any documented opinion.

The preamble to the Statute expressed, with notable clarity, the civilizing logic that underpinned Portuguese colonial policy: the indigenous person was “on the path to civilization,” and the State had the duty to impel him to follow that course. This conception grounded the project of assimilation as the axis of the relationship between *metrópole* and colonies, reinforced by the words of Minister Sarmiento Rodrigues, who saw the goal of state action as making the indigenous peoples “good and conscientious Portuguese.”

The structure of the Statute comprised 67 articles, divided into four chapters:

- *Chapter I* – defined, in six articles, the condition of Portuguese indigenous person and his subjective status;



- *Chapter II* – addressed the legal situation of indigenous peoples, divided into four sections: political organization, crimes and penalties, private relations, and judicial organization;
- *Chapter III* – regulated the extinction of indigenous status and the acquisition of citizenship;
- *Chapter IV* – provided for the execution of the Statute.

It was, therefore, a special and personal regime, applicable only to individuals born or residing in the provinces of Guinea, Angola, and Mozambique who had not yet achieved the cultural standards defined as prerequisites for full citizenship.

This condition of legal exception translated into a position of subalternity within the Portuguese legal order. Article 2 of the Statute defines as indigenous “the individual of the Black race or his descendants who, having been born or habitually living” in the aforementioned provinces, had not yet attained “the education and the individual and social habits presupposed for the full application of the public and private law of Portuguese citizens.”

The definition incorporates five criteria: (i) race; (ii) descent; (iii) birth; (iv) residence; and (v) culture. Compared to the 1929 Statute, significant changes can be observed: the category of “non-indigenous” was eliminated; detribalized and “evolving” indigenous persons were now included; a single and exclusive definition applicable to all provinces was established; and the identification criteria were expanded.

Several articles of the Statute clearly express the Portuguese colonial project of forced assimilation, subalternization, and surveillance of colonized peoples. Article 4 stipulates that “the State shall promote by all means the improvement of the material and moral conditions of the life of the indigenous peoples, the development of their aptitudes and natural faculties and, in general, their education through teaching and work for the transformation of their primitive customs, the enhancement of their activity and their active integration into the community through access to citizenship.” Article 5 further provides that “the State shall provide the necessary assistance for the improvement of the populations’

health and their demographic growth, as well as for the introduction of new production techniques into the economy of native societies.”

The civilizing doctrine is also strongly evident in Article 6, which declares: “Education specifically intended for the indigenous peoples must aim at the general purposes of moral, civic, intellectual, and physical education established by law, and at the acquisition of habits and work skills, in harmony with gender, social conditions, and the needs of regional economies.” The Statute also regulated religious and family aspects, as in Article 30, which states: “Baptized indigenous persons may contract marriage in accordance with canonical law before ministers of the Catholic Church, provided that they meet the conditions required by civil law.”

Labor relations – central to Portuguese colonial policy – are addressed in Article 32, which states: “The State shall seek to ensure that the indigenous person recognizes labor as an indispensable element of progress, but authorities may only impose labor in cases specifically provided for by law.” Article 33 affirms that “indigenous persons may freely choose the work they wish to perform, whether on their own account or for others, or on the lands that may be assigned to them for this purpose.” Complementarily, Article 34 provides that “the provision of labor to non-indigenous persons shall be based on contractual freedom and on the right to fair wages and assistance, which must be supervised by the State through appropriate bodies.”

Finally, the status of indigenous person could be extinguished and citizenship acquired (assimilation process) through the fulfillment of strict requirements, established in Article 56: “An individual may lose the condition of indigenous person and acquire citizenship if he proves that he cumulatively meets the following requirements: (a) Be over 18 years of age; (b) Speak the Portuguese language correctly; (c) Practice a profession, art, or trade that provides sufficient income for his own maintenance and that of his dependents, or possess adequate property for the same purpose; (d) Have good conduct and have acquired the education and habits presupposed for the full application of the public and private law of Portuguese citizens; (e) Not have been noted as refractory to military service nor declared a deserter.”

These provisions reveal a legal regime that instituted citizenship as a selective privilege, strongly conditioned by linguistic, cultural, economic, and moral criteria of assimilation. The indigenous person was placed under tutelage and constant surveillance, with his legal emancipation subject to the approval of the colonizing state. Through these legal mechanisms, the 1954 Statute consolidated the subalternization of colonial subjects, perpetuating an order based on the racialization of citizenship and the denial of otherness as legitimate.

## 5 Fanonian reading of the Statute and the effects of alienation and symbolic violence

*In what ways does colonialism, through legal language, institute a system of the inferiorization of the racialized other, naturalizing their exclusion and dehumanization?* This is the interpretive key proposed here for the analysis of the Statute of the Indigenous Peoples of the Portuguese Empire, approved in 1954, in light of the reflections of Frantz Fanon. Far from being merely a legal framework, the Statute reveals itself as a technology of power that operates in the production of colonized subjectivities, social hierarchies, and the racial imaginary of the empire.

Fanon, in his critique of colonialism, points out that European domination over colonized peoples is not limited to brute force, but extends to the symbolic sphere – to the production of discourses, values, images, and forms of knowledge that structure the relationship between colonizer and colonized. In this sense, documents such as the Statute function as instruments of symbolic violence: they create legal categories that naturalize inequality, sustain the myth of the civilizing mission, and promote the alienation of the colonized in relation to their own culture, language, and identity.

### 5.1 The dehumanization of the indigenous person and the discourse of inferiority

The Fanonian reading of the 1954 *Statute of the Indigenous Peoples* reveals with clarity how Portuguese colonial legislation functioned not merely as an instrument of administration but as an ideological mechanism of dehumanization. The indigenous person

was represented as an incomplete being, primitive – a body to be reformed and therefore legitimately dominated. Fanon describes this symbolic operation powerfully in *The Wretched of the Earth*:

The native is declared impermeable to ethics, absence of values, and also negation of values. He is, let us admit it, the enemy of values. In this sense, he is absolute evil. A corrosive element that destroys everything it touches, a deformed element that disfigures everything relating to aesthetics or morals, the depository of malevolent forces, the unconscious and irremediable instrument of blind powers. (Fanon, 1968, p. 30-31)

This symbolic portrayal of the indigenous person as a civilizational threat finds direct resonance in the Statute itself. In Article 2, when defining who is considered indigenous, the text reinforces the idea of “persons who find themselves at a different stage of civilization than the rest of the population,” that is, outside the fullness of human condition as recognized by the colonizer. The indigenous person is not a bearer of full rights but a being “in evolution,” always indebted to the European civilizational norm.

The same logic appears in Article 4, which states that the State shall promote the “transformation of primitive habits and customs,” aiming at the “active integration into the community.” Such “integration” thus presupposes the abandonment of one’s own practices and knowledge – deemed backward – and the adoption of colonial behaviors considered superior.

This legal structure, which transforms the indigenous person into a “project of a person,” echoes what Achille Mbembe describes as the production of “superfluous forms of life” within colonial power. According to him, colonialism institutes an “economy of death” that goes beyond physical elimination, operating through symbolic degradation and the confinement of the other within zones of political nonexistence. The Statute, by classifying and regulating the indigenous person as a being in deficiency, embodies this *necropolitical* regime: “sovereignty resides, ultimately, in the power to decide who may live and who must die” (Mbembe, 2018, p. 66).

Quijano (1999), in turn, helps elucidate how this operation is inscribed in what he called the *coloniality of power*: the articulation between racial classification, forced labor, and the devaluation of non-European knowledge systems. The inferiorization of the indigenous person is intrinsically tied to the imposition of an epistemological hierarchy in which only European knowledge is validated as true, rational, and civilized. The Statute crystallizes this hierarchy by defining the indigenous person as a subject “in the process of evolution” and, therefore, permanently lagging behind the European model.

Fanon, reflecting on the role of language in colonization, shows how colonialism acts to “colonize the mind” of dominated subjects. The imposition of a European language and of moral and aesthetic values functions as a process of substituting the colonized person’s subjectivity. This point connects directly to Fanon’s notion of *white masks*, when he asserts: “The Black man wants to be white, and he will seek this transformation through the adoption of the colonizer’s codes. The Antillean Black man becomes whiter – that is, he approaches the true man – to the extent that he adopts the French language.” (Fanon, 2008, pp. 27 and 34)

The “transformation of customs” proposed by the Statute is therefore not neutral: it is part of an identity-substitution project in which the indigenous person can exist only insofar as he ceases to be what he is. What is at stake is, as Aimé Césaire affirmed, a “project of dehumanization” that affects not only the physical body but also the soul and the imagination: “Colonization works to dehumanize man himself, even in the most intimate sense of the colonizer, and inevitably, to dehumanize the colonized.” (Césaire, 2007, p. 26)

From these readings, it becomes clear that the dehumanization carried out by the *Statute of the Indigenous Peoples* was not merely a reflection of colonial ideology but an active instrument in reproducing the colonial order. It did not simply organize the legal inferiorization of the indigenous person – it rendered it intelligible, justifiable, and even desirable within the colonial system, both for the colonizer and, tragically, for the colonized himself.

## **5.2 Education as a technology of colonial domination**

The architecture of education in the Portuguese colonial context was meticulously designed as a tool of cultural and political domination. The distinction between official education and indigenous education was structured as an epistemological and racial hierarchy, in which European knowledge was deemed superior and civilized, while indigenous knowledge was reduced to a condition of backwardness. In this system, the colonial school functioned not as a space of emancipation but as a mechanism for internalizing inferiority, imposing upon the indigenous person an ideal of humanity centered on the colonizer's standards. As Mazula warns:

Official education was intended for the children of settlers or assimilated individuals, while the other, indigenous education, was ingeniously tied to the structure of the system of domination in all its aspects. Indigenous education (also called rudimentary primary education) aimed to elevate the native gradually from 'savage life' to the 'civilized life' of the cultured peoples of the overseas provinces, whereas official education [...] sought to provide the child with the fundamental tools of all knowledge and the foundations of a general culture. (Mazula, 1995, p. 80)

This division was not neutral – it reproduced and perpetuated the structural racism of the colonial order. The indigenous person, considered “uncivilized,” was to be educated in a functional manner, according to moral and behavioral principles defined by the colonizer. This is evident in Article 6 of the *Statute of the Indigenous Peoples*, which states that “education specifically intended for the indigenous peoples must aim at the general purposes of moral, civic, intellectual, and physical education.” There is no recognition here of epistemic diversity, but rather the authoritarian imposition of external values.

Furthermore, the same article specifies that indigenous education must also include “the acquisition of habits and work skills, in harmony with gender, social conditions, and the needs of regional economies.” This wording exposes the true colonial project: to form disciplined workers, molded to serve the structures of imperial production and administration, shaping their education according to the logic of capital and racialized domination. The school thus becomes a factory of useful and docile bodies.

This pedagogy of alienation also manifests itself in the institutional separation between “rudimentary” and “official” education. As Castiano, Nguenha, and Berthoud



(2005, p. 13) point out, “indigenous education aimed to reproduce and perpetuate the colonial domination system,” while official education prepared the colonial elite to serve the interests of the Portuguese State. Education, therefore, was not merely a public policy – it was a strategy of symbolic warfare, directed toward the production of inferiority and submission.

Dias (2002) notes that the contents of rudimentary education were centered on the Portuguese language, Christian morality, and the glorification of the empire. The Church, in turn, played an ambiguous role in this project. Although responsible for the Christianization of the indigenous peoples, its missionaries were constantly monitored by the Portuguese State, which feared that “alternative” forms of faith might threaten imperial hegemony. As Chimbutane (2015) highlights, the goal was not the spiritualization of Africans but their nationalization in the image of the colonizer.

The structural hierarchy between educational systems, analyzed by Gómez (1999), demonstrates how access to knowledge was rigidly controlled. For the indigenous population, the educational path was fragmented – with late entry, shorter schooling, and limited instruction confined to basic contents. Settlers and assimilated individuals, however, had full access to primary, secondary, and higher education, in a progression that positioned them as the sole legitimate bearers of reason and knowledge. The educational system thus sustained the social and racial inequalities of the colony.

Finally, it must be understood that Portuguese colonial education did not merely transmit content – it produced subjectivities molded to accept their subaltern place. The education offered to indigenous peoples did not provide them with tools to contest the order; on the contrary, it offered a distorted mirror in which the colonized learned to despise their own image. The school, in this sense, was a battlefield of symbolic struggle, where what was at stake was not only access to knowledge but the very definition of humanity itself.

### **5.3 The desire for whiteness and psychic violence**

Fanon demonstrates that colonialism acts not only upon land and bodies but, above all, upon the psyche. By establishing a racial and civilizational hierarchy, it imposes upon the colonized not only obedience but also the desire to become *other*. The symbolic violence of the colonial system transforms the European into the model of humanity and the colonized into his shadow – a *non-being* who desperately seeks to fill the void of his denied identity. It is in this sense that Fanon formulates one of the most unsettling theses of *Black Skin, White Masks*:

The Black man has only one zone of nonbeing. A man is denied. An angel is recognized. The Black man is a Black man; that is, when one looks at him, one assumes he is guilty, that he is inferior, that he is uncultured, and even that he does not think. [...] And the problem of the Black man is as follows: to be recognized as human by those who have reduced him to animality. (Fanon, 2008, p. 181-182)

This dehumanization becomes even more devastating when the colonized himself internalizes it as truth. In this context, the desire for recognition turns into the desire for *whiteness* – not merely phenotypical, but ontological. Fanon asks, “What does the Black man want?” and answers, “The Black man wants to be white” (Fanon, 2008, p. 27). Such an aspiration is possible only because the colonial system has taught that whiteness is synonymous with civilization, rationality, and full humanity.

Language, for Fanon, refers not only to speech as a mere instrument of communication but to a social institution permeated by the values of a culture. At the level of language as communication, the Antillean will avoid speaking *petit-nègre* at all costs. If a Frenchman replies in that register, it will be understood as a return to the zone of nonbeing – a symbolic rejection of his attempt to enter the zone of being. At the level of language as a social institution, Fanon identifies a true process of cultural enslavement, through which the Antillean assimilates French values to the point of self-denial. He writes, with irony and anguish:

In school, young Black students kept repeating, “our ancestors, the Gauls”; when reading stories about savages in white men’s books, they immediately thought of the Black man living in Africa; when writing essays about summer vacations,

adolescents between ten and fourteen years old wrote: “I like vacation time because I can run through the fields, breathe fresh air, and return with rosy cheeks”. (Fanon, 2008, p. 141)

Like those who were answered in *petit-nègre*, these youths were continually returned to the zone of nonbeing – a zone of ontological exclusion, where recognition is always deferred. Fanon, as an Antillean man, was himself captured by this process. His experience during the Second World War and his later move to France to study psychiatry confronted him directly with the limits of the assimilationist ideal:

*What is this talk about a Black people, a Black nationality? I am French. I am interested in French culture, in French civilization, in the French people. [...] I am personally concerned with the destiny of France, with French values, with the French nation. What do I have to do with a Black Empire?* (Fanon, 2008, p. 170)

Here Fanon exposes the depth of the alienation to which he was subjected – an alienation that made him think from the oppressor’s point of view. Only when he is thrust back into the zone of nonbeing does he begin to break with the assimilationist ideology, recognizing it as symbolic violence and an instrument of psychic domination.

In the Portuguese colonial context, this same structure is codified in Article 56 of the 1954 *Statute of the Indigenous Peoples*, which establishes the criteria under which an indigenous person might acquire citizenship. First, the individual must be over eighteen years of age (Article 56, clause a). Then, he must “speak the Portuguese language correctly” (clause b). This requirement reaffirms language as a marker of recognized humanity. As Fanon states: “To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture. [...] The Antillean Negro becomes whiter – that is, he approaches the true man – to the extent that he adopts the French language.” (Fanon, 2008, p. 34)

Thus, the Portuguese indigenous person could only be recognized as a citizen by denying his own linguistic and cultural matrix. Access to citizenship therefore becomes a symbolic rite of passage from nonbeing to being – a rite that entails the renunciation of ancestry.

Next, the article requires that the aspiring citizen “practice a profession, art, or trade that provides sufficient income for his own maintenance and for that of his family” (clause

c). Here, citizenship is restricted to those who conform to the colonizer's capitalist and productive logic, disregarding the communal and symbolic forms of social reproduction characteristic of indigenous populations.

Clause d demands “good conduct and the education and habits presupposed for the full application of the public and private law of Portuguese citizens.” This requirement allows for a subjective evaluation of indigenous behavior, placing in the hands of colonial authorities the power to define who is “civilized” enough. It functions as an instrument of control over the ways of life, bodies, and subjectivities of the colonized.

Finally, clause e stipulates that the indigenous person “must not have been noted as refractory to military service nor declared a deserter.” Allegiance to the empire and its war machinery thus becomes a prerequisite for citizenship; that is, the indigenous person must not only obey but also fight for – and, if necessary, die for – the very power that dominates him.

The division between the *zone of being* and the *zone of nonbeing*, as Fanon proposes, is a Manichaean construction of colonialism. Yet neither of these zones is homogeneous. Within the world of “non-beings,” hierarchies persist. The Antillean, for example, is a subhuman seeking recognition from the white man but, at the same time, constructs his own inferior “non-being”: the continental African. Fanon notes, “The Antillean also produces a lesser non-being, the African. The former feels ashamed when mistaken for Senegalese, for instance.” (Fanon, 2008, p. 143)

This reproduction of colonial logic by the colonized themselves reveals how deep the symbolic trauma of colonization runs: it produces subjects who desire to become the oppressor and, in the same gesture, oppress others as a way of distancing themselves from their own dehumanization.

## 5.4 Colonial antagonism and the desire for liberation

For Frantz Fanon, colonialism is, above all, a regime of violence – not only on the physical plane but, most profoundly, within the symbolic and subjective spheres. The colonial structure is founded upon a radical antagonism between colonizer and colonized, in which the mere existence of one represents a threat to the domination of the other. This antagonism is constitutive of the colonial logic and prevents any true reconciliation between the two sides. Fanon summarizes this tension in a precise formulation: “The colonist’s work is to make impossible the dreams of liberty for the colonized. The colonized’s work is to imagine every possible means of annihilating the colonist.” (Fanon, 1968, p. 87)

Within this struggle, the *Statute of the Portuguese Indigenous Peoples* of 1954 emerges as a legal and ideological tool designed to neutralize the desire for liberation by incorporating mechanisms of normalization and control. One of the most powerful among these is the regulation of labor – conceived not as a right but as a civilizing duty. In this regard, colonial legislation reveals its intention to mold the indigenous subject in the image of the colonizer, erasing his culture, ways of life, and cosmologies.

Article 32 makes this explicit when it declares: “The State shall seek to ensure that the indigenous person recognizes labor as an indispensable element of progress, but authorities may only impose labor in cases specifically provided for by law.” The expression “shall seek to ensure” exposes the vertical and authoritarian logic of colonization. The indigenous person is not called to work as a means of autonomy but as a path to assimilation into European values. Progress here is not neutral – it is progress *within* the colonial order, marked by a Eurocentric conception of development. As Santiago Castro-Gómez (2005) observes, this “abyssal reason” of the West constructs a line of separation between the civilized human and the subhuman colonized, legitimizing colonial tutelage as a civilizing mission.

Labor thus becomes an instrument of alienation. As Albert Memmi notes: “The colonized is constantly pressured to work not for his freedom, but to escape the misery imposed by the very structure of colonialism. His labor is supervised, exploited, and never regarded as free creation.” (Memmi, 1977, p. 124) This process is reiterated in Article 33, which states: “Indigenous persons may freely choose the work they wish to perform,

whether on their own account, for others, or on lands that may be assigned to them for this purpose.”

The clause of “free choice” is illusory. The “free” labor of the indigenous person is, in truth, a monitored freedom – confined within territory delimited and authorized by the colonial State. The very fact that work is to be carried out only on “lands assigned for that purpose” reveals the absence of sovereignty of the indigenous person over his own life and territory. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) points out, modern colonialism always combined forms of juridical and epistemic violence, depriving colonized peoples of the ability to produce knowledge about themselves and to govern their own social practices.

Moreover, Article 34 stipulates that: “The provision of labor to non-indigenous persons shall be based on contractual freedom and on the right to fair wages and assistance, which must be supervised by the State through appropriate bodies.”

The reference to “fair wages” and “contractual freedom” serves to mask exploitation under the liberal language of legality. Yet, as Achille Mbembe reminds us, in the colonial regime there is no real symmetry between the parties to the contract: “Colonization is founded on an unequal and non-reciprocal contract, in which the colonized is always in a position of inferiority. Contractual freedom is a fiction, for the very subjectivity of the colonized is denied.” (Mbembe, 2018, p. 59)

By articulating this language of legality, the Statute conceals its function as an instrument of dehumanization. The colonization of labor is, in this sense, a colonization of time, of the body, and of desire. The indigenous person is considered a subject only insofar as he becomes useful within the colonial machinery – that is, insofar as he relinquishes his autonomous existence. Fanon understands this process as part of the production of the alienated colonized subject, who internalizes the colonial hierarchy as natural. For him, colonial violence seeks not only to dominate the body but to capture the imagination.

Forced labor, even in its contractualized forms, stands at the center of this process. “For the colonized, life only begins with the radical rupture from colonialism. The new world cannot be born without violence. Liberation is, above all, a psychic process.” (Fanon, 1968, p. 50)



## 6 Final considerations

The discussions developed throughout this study made it possible to demonstrate that the *Statute of the Portuguese Indigenous Peoples* of 1954, far from being a mere juridical-administrative device, forcefully materialized the symbolic and practical structures of late Portuguese colonialism. Through a critical reading informed by the Fanonian perspective, it became evident that the legal mechanisms of categorization between “indigenous” and “assimilated,” as well as the norms concerning labor, education, and citizenship, functioned as instruments for the systematic production of the colonized subjects’ inferiority.

These mechanisms operated not only at the institutional level but, above all, within subjectivities, promoting the alienation and dehumanization of the colonized, who was compelled to see himself through the colonizer’s gaze. Labor, schooling, legal language, and the very figure of the “good assimilated indigenous person” were mobilized to establish a logic of exclusion disguised as civilization, creating a life horizon regulated by standards that denied the value and dignity of African cultures.

In this sense, the Statute is inscribed as part of an imperial grammar whose consequences extend beyond the legal field and project themselves onto the ways of being, thinking, and feeling of subalternized subjects. To reflect on the Statute, therefore, is also to question the colonial legacies that still persist in contemporary forms of inequality, racialization, and *epistemicide*, calling upon the educational, legal, and political spheres to critically revisit the frameworks that sustain the coloniality of the present.

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**Responsible publisher:** Genifer Andrade

**Ad hoc experts:** Cláudia Battestin e Joelma Monteiro de Carvalho.

## How to cite this article (ABNT):

HUO, Anfibio Zacarias.; SOUZA NETO, João Clemente de. Fanonian analysis of the Statute of Portuguese Indigenous Peoples in Guinea, Angola, and Mozambique (1954).

**Rev. Pemo**, Fortaleza, v. 8, e15708, 2026. Available in:

<https://revistas.uece.br/index.php/revpemo/article/view/15708>

Received on June 13, 2025.

Accepted on August 20, 2025.

Published in January 1, 2026.