

“No Fist Is Big Enough to Hide the Sky”: 100 Years of Amílcar Cabral

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Anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist, party organizer and guerrilla warfare strategist, diplomat and publicist, revolutionary theorist and internationalist, Amílcar Cabral was among the most original Marxists of the 20th century.

Amílcar Lopes da Costa Cabral was born on September 12, 1924 in the town of Bafata in Portuguese Guinea, wedged between what was then French Guinea and the French colony of Senegal, in West Africa. His parents hailed from Cape Verde (Cabo Verde), an archipelago of impoverished islands in the North Atlantic, some 450 km west of the African mainland.

Under Portuguese rule, the Cape Verdeans were regarded as “civilized” because they spoke Portuguese, were of Christian faith, and adopted western dress. They were classified as *assimilado*: the people in-between the white settler-colonial regime and the black African population, including in the colonial administrative service in Guinea-Bissau.

As a child, Cabral moved with his family to Cape Verde; his schooling was in conditions of economic hardship. Belying its name, far from green the islands are semi-arid. Uninhabited until the 15th century, the Portuguese claimed the territory, strategically located on the transatlantic maritime route for the slave trade in Brazil and the Caribbean, and later for whale-hunting.

They settled inhabitable areas with whites, and brought captive West Africans to work the land. By the mid-20th century, 69% of the population was deemed *mestiço* (i.e. mixed heritage). The despoliation of its natural resources, through deforestation and over-grazing, was accompanied over five centuries by periodic drought followed by devastating famine, triggering waves of emigration as far afield as New England.

In Cabral’s own youth, the droughts of 1941-43 and 1947-48 led to anywhere between 30,000 and 45,000 deaths; he experienced the former personally.

It is not surprising that in 1945 when Cabral secured a scholarship to the University of Lisbon in the imperial capital, he chose to study agronomy with a particular interest in soil science.

Portugal had been under fascist rule since 1926. There was little democratic space and the Left conducted its activities clandestinely. It was in Lisbon that Cabral would meet and form political ties with African students from other Portuguese colonies. Some of them, like Agostinho Neto and Mário de Andrade (from Angola), and Eduardo Mondlane and Marcelino dos Santos (from Mozambique), would become leaders of the freedom movement in their countries.

Becoming Anti-Colonialists, and More

Their circle studied socialist writing from Brazil, as well as on the African-American experience of racism and deprivation in the United States. They also read and discussed the assertions of Négritude in Francophone Africa via Aimé Césaire (of Martinique) and Léopold Senghor (of Senegal), from which they would later critically distance. They were in contact with the illegal Portuguese Communist Party that operated in secret through broad organizations such as the youth wing of the Movement of Democratic Unity (MUD-Juvenil).

Upon graduation, Cabral joined the Lisbon Agronomic Station, where he conducted research in southern Portugal, a region of stark poverty and not coincidentally highly unequal ownership of land.⁽¹⁾

In 1952 he chose to return to Guinea to lead the Agronomic Center in Bissau. The following year, taking advantage of his official role, Cabral conducted the first Agricultural Survey of Guinea.

He used this opportunity to travel widely across the mainland territory, to familiarize himself with its topography, economy, the diversity of its peoples and their practices and customs. This immersion in the reality of this land and its inhabitants would later contribute to his important political text, "Brief analysis of social structure in Guinea."

His activities attracted the attention of the colonial administration, which banned him from living in Guinea. Unable to work or operate there, he joined a private company based in Angola, where he undertook studies on soil conditions and agricultural production.

Over the course of 1955 and 1956, while in Angola, Cabral participated in the formation of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). This underlined his Pan-Africanist vision of solidarity and unity as well as his intransigence against colonialism and imperialism wherever it manifested itself: in Congo, in Cuba, in Palestine, in South Africa, in Southern Arabia, in Vietnam.

On a secret visit to Bissau in 1956, Cabral and five others including his half-brother Luís founded what became the African Party of the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC) on September 19. While these pioneer members were of Cape Verdean origin, they were committed to the liberation of Guinea-Bissau too. Other nationalist organizations were from Guinea-Bissau, usually based on personalities and ethnicities, and opposed to union with Cape Verde.

Driven to the Countryside

Initially the underground party attempted to organize among the miniscule working class, and the urban poor in mainland Guinea. When dock workers at Pidjiguiti Quay in Bissau took part in peaceful protest on August 3, 1959, the colonial regime brutally suppressed them, massacring 50 and injuring over 100 in just 20 minutes.

Shocked by this cruel loss of life, and realizing their weaknesses, the PAIGC switched to mobilizing in the countryside. The leadership at this point were intellectuals from the Cape Verde islands.

They were strangers to the Guinean hinterland, away from its towns that they knew better. This is where Cabral's study of peasant society, including its cleavages along ethnicity and

religion, and contradictions including land ownership, gender relations, and socio-political organization, proved invaluable.

If, as Cabral and his comrades concluded, the urban working class was too miniscule and unready for revolutionary change, did this mean that the peasantry would substitute for it? No. The peasantry was the main “physical force” of the liberation movement, but was not “a revolutionary force.”(2) Instead, in the absence of a national capitalist class, the petty bourgeoisie — located between the colonial state and the colonized masses — is most likely to wield the functions of state power after decolonization.

This intermediary class, from which many leaders of revolutionary movements across time and space have emerged, has two roads before it, Cabral suggested. They could surrender to their natural tendency to become bourgeois via class location in the state bureaucracy and as compradors servicing foreign capital in commercial relations. Or be reborn as a “revolutionary worker completely identified with the deepest aspirations of the people.” These conflicting choices are the dilemma of the petty bourgeoisie in the national liberation struggle. In a famous phrase, Cabral summed it up as “to betray the revolution or to commit suicide as a class.”(3)

After some years of preparation with funds, light weapons, and combat training from the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and China, the PAIGC launched its armed struggle on January 23, 1963.(4) Later, Cabral succeeded in negotiating assistance in the form of sugar, tobacco, and uniforms from Cuba, followed by military advisors and medics; and food, clothing and medicine from Sweden and other Scandinavian countries. The enemy was of course far better armed and resourced, supported by its NATO allies particularly the United States and West Germany, and spewing napalm.

However, before and during the military campaign, Cabral was clear that the political fight was his priority: to breach the “wall of silence” built around Portugal’s subjugation of African peoples.(5) He tirelessly traveled to combat the ideology of “lusotropicalism”: Portuguese colonialism as adaptive to the people of the tropics and neither racist or exploitative.

Cabral was a man of action but also a critical and creative thinker. As his friend Basil Davidson reminded us, “Thought and action, he never separated that sequence, just as he never changed its order.”(6)

Return to Our Own History

It was not colonialism that carried the colonized into history as was claimed for it. Rather, colonialism was an interruption in the history of the people. “In taking up arms to liberate ourselves,” Cabral reminded his audience, “we want to return to our history, on our own feet, by our own means and through our own sacrifices.”(7) As to when history begins, it could not be contingent on the emergence of class and therefore class struggle, as this would condemn societies without class relations, to be people “living without history, or outside history when they were subjected to the yoke of imperialism.”(8)

Instead, he argued it is the “level of development of productive forces ... [that] is the true and permanent motive force of history.”(9) The objective of national liberation becomes the liberation of productive forces grabbed by imperialist domination. This enables the self-determination of the once colonized to progress to a higher form of economic, social and cultural existence. That transformation in the level of productive forces and their system of

ownership, in short, the mode of production, is what is called “revolution.”

Additionally, Cabral had to grapple with the messiness of armed struggle where those bearing arms can become oppressive of those in whose name they claim to be fighting for. At the first Party congress in Cassacá in February 1964, the guerilla units that had operated autonomously were merged into a people’s army, under the control of the political leadership.

He reminded the party leaders and the cadre alike that “we are *armed militants* and not *militarists*” (emphasis in the original). He cautioned them to “Hide nothing from the masses of our people. Tell no lies. Expose lies whenever they are told. Mask no difficulties, mistakes, failures. Claim no easy victories. ...”(10)

The Cassacá Congress also marked an important outward turn in the direction of prefigurative politics. The PAIGC began creating institutions for people in liberated areas, conveying a promise of what independence and freedom ought to mean: schools, health centers, elected tribunals, people’s stores where goods could be bartered. Farming food crops for subsistence, artisanal production for skilled work, and the nurturing of small industries were encouraged.

Base committees were formed in liberated areas through popular election from a party-list. Five members were elected, two places being reserved for women, and each assigned an area of responsibility.(11) This structure was crafted in far-from-ideal conditions of war not peace; and in the absence of political competition. However, it was also a first experience and education in participatory democracy.

In one of continuous injunctions to the cadre for their political orientation, he urged them to “[r]emember always that the people do not fight for ideas, for things that exist in the heads of individuals. The people fight and accept the necessary sacrifices in order to gain material benefits, to live better and in peace, to experience progress, and to guarantee the future of their children.”

Slogans and demands, no matter how good and important, are “empty words and without significance for the people if they are not translated into a real improvement in their living conditions.”(12)

As a theoretician and strategist of national liberation, Cabral was insistent that “those who lead the struggle must never confuse what they have in their head ... with the specific reality of the land.” Whatever ideas we have from what we read or what others tell us of their own experience he underscored that “our feet are planted on the ground in our land.”(13)

Foreign military advisors often sought to transplant their battlefield approaches to the war against the Portuguese in Guiné but Cabral resisted them, expressing “reservations about the systematization of phenomena.”(14) He saw it as an error to mimic the experiences of others, since these were based on their unique geographical, historical, economic and social conditions.

At the first Tricontinental Congress in Havana in 1966, he cautioned that no matter how similar the case and identical the enemy, “national liberation and social revolution are not exportable commodities. They are ... a local, national, product — more or less influenced by

(favorable and unfavorable) external factors, but essentially determined and conditioned by the historical reality of each people.”(15)

Culture as Resistance

Culture is the other front of resistance and struggle for Cabral. It is both shield and sword. “Culture is simultaneously the fruit of a people’s history and a determinant of history.”(16) It is in his view the dynamic expression of social relationships, principally those between humans and nature, and between humans as individuals, groups of individuals, strata and classes.

However, culture to him was never essentialist nor static. It contained both positive and negative features. It ought to be forged by, and not only feed into, the movement for national liberation. He was careful to differentiate what he meant by culture from that to which the indigenous colonial elite was attached or what was imagined and invented by colonial diasporas.

Cabral was killed on January 20, 1973, aged 48, in Conakry, capital of the Republic of Guinea, which shares a land border with Guinea-Bissau. That is where the PAIGC leadership operated in exile. His assassin was someone he knew, a fellow militant.(17)

However, as Cabral himself had predicted, aware of the imperialist-inspired plots against his life stretching back over a decade, his death did not derail the independence of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, which was finally declared on September 24, 1973.(18) By then two-thirds of Guinea-Bissau was controlled by the PAIGC.

Moreover, the politico-military campaign he directed in Guinea-Bissau, along with those of liberation movements in Angola and Mozambique, directly contributed to the overthrow in Portugal of “the most long lived fascist State in history ... and the end of the oldest colonial empire in the world.”(19)

Fourteen years of anti-colonial wars in Portuguese Africa triggered the “Carnation Revolution” beginning with the overthrow of the dictatorship by the Armed Forces Movement (MFA) in Lisbon on April 25, 1974. The new regime soon began the transfer of power in the African colonies to the liberation movements.

What is meant by the “liberation of the people”? Informed by the experience of neocolonialism that followed “independence” and the venality and tyranny of the postcolonial elite that assumed power, Cabral insisted that it is more than the expulsion of colonialists, the hoisting of a national flag, and the playing of a national anthem:

“It is the liberation of the productive forces of our country, the liquidation of all kinds of imperialist or colonial domination in our country, and the taking of every measure to avoid any new exploitation of our people. We don’t confuse exploitation with the color of one’s skin. We want equality, social justice and freedom.”(20)

Why do we return to Cabral in a different time to his? Recently, Ochieng Okoth invokes him among others, to advocate “a new mode of anti-imperialist politics” by way of four combined maneuvers.(21) These may be adapted as follows.

First, to retrieve the promise of a post-imperialist world embedded in national liberation or anti-colonial Marxism, from a critical reading of its experience. The struggle for freedom

cannot stop with the ejection of colonialists and imperialists; but must grow into an attack on the social and economic mechanisms initiated by imperialism.

Next, to engage with the critique of political economy. Without properly unmasking the relations and processes of domination, we cannot make sense of subordination within the international system and within states.

Third, by basing ourselves on historical materialism to understand the motion and dynamics of social change; and the deployment of hierarchy and difference in class societies. To change the world, we need the theory and method to interpret it.

Finally, to revive internationalism through anti-imperialist solidarity across movements be they in the Global North or Global South. To see our struggles as interconnected, while respectful of their specificities.

In all this and more, the life and work of Amílcar Cabral is exemplary.

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Notes

1. The wretched world of 20th century Alentejo day laborers to whom Cabral dedicated his dissertation, is magnificently fictionalized by José Saramago (himself the son of landless peasants) in *Raised from the Ground* (1980). Trans. Margaret Jull Costa (London: Harvill Secker, 2012).
2. Amílcar Cabral, “Brief analysis of the social structure in Guinea” in *Revolution in Guinea: Selected Texts by Amílcar Cabral*. Trans. and Ed. Richard Handyside (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1969), p. 61.
3. Amílcar Cabral, “Presuppositions and objectives of national liberation in relation to social structure” in *Unity and Struggle: Speeches and Writings*. Trans. Michael Wolfers (London: Heinemann, 1980), p. 136.
4. For a fascinating reconstruction of the dynamics of these relationships, see Natalia Telepneva, *Cold War Liberation: The Soviet Union and the Collapse of the Portuguese Empire in Africa, 1961-1975*(Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).
5. Amílcar Cabral, “Foreword” to Basil Davidson, *The Liberation of Guiné: Aspects of an African Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 9.
6. Basil Davidson, “Tributes to a Fallen Comrade,” *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* (Los Angeles), Vol. 3, Issue 3 (1973): 11-30, p. 13.
7. “The nationalist movements of the Portuguese colonies” in *Revolution in Guinea: Selected Texts by Amílcar Cabral, op. cit.*, p. 78.
8. “Presuppositions and objectives of national liberation in relation to social structure” in *Unity and Struggle: Speeches and Writings, op. cit.*,p. 124.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
10. “Tell no lies. Claim no easy victories ...” in *Revolution in Guinea: Selected Texts by Amílcar Cabral, op. cit.*, p. 87.
11. Lars Rudebeck, *Guinea-Bissau. A Study of Political Mobilization*(Uppsala: Scandinavian

- Institute of African Studies, 1974), pp. 124-132.
12. "Tell no lies. Claim no easy victories ..." in *Revolution in Guinea: Selected Texts* by Amílcar Cabral, op. cit., p. 86.
 13. "To start out from the reality of our land - to be realists" in *Unity and Struggle: Speeches and Writings*, op. cit., pp. 45 and 44 respectively.
 14. "Practical problems and tactics" in *Revolution in Guinea: Selected Texts* by Amílcar Cabral, op. cit., p. 141.
 15. "Presuppositions and objectives of national liberation in relation to social structure" in *Unity and Struggle: Speeches and Writings*, op. cit., p. 122.
 16. Amílcar Cabral, "National Liberation and Culture" in *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amílcar Cabral*. Ed. Africa Information Service (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), p. 41.
 17. The received version that the killing was orchestrated by the Portuguese secret police (the PIDE), having infiltrated the PAIGC and turned some Guinean cadre against Cabral, has been challenged by Antonio Tomás, *Amílcar Cabral: The Life of a Reluctant Nationalist* (London: Hurst & Company, 2021), pp. 187-199. While affirming the longstanding intent and past attempts of Portuguese fascism to physically eliminate Cabral, Tomás places greater weight in this sadly successful instance, on the schism between PAIGC cadre from Guinea-Bissau and their Cape Verdean leadership.
 18. The union between Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde broke on November 14, 1980, cracked by the unresolved tensions within the PAIGC.
 19. Robin Blackburn, "The Test in Portugal," *New Left Review* (London), 1/87-88 (September-December 1974): 5-46, p. 5.
 20. Amílcar Cabral, *Our People Are Our Mountains* (London: Committee for Freedom in Mozambique, Angola & Guiné, 1972), p. 8.
 21. Kevin Ochieng Okoth, *Red Africa: Reclaiming Revolutionary Black Politics* (London: Verso, 2023), p. 16.

Featured image: Amilcar Cabral, presumably during the Cassacá Congress, freed from the southern region of Guinea. Wikimedia

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