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Forty years ago, on January 20th 1973, Amílcar Cabral was assassinated in Conakry. His death was shocked many throughout the world. Cabral was famous in the international arena as one of the most resourceful theorists and practitioners of revolution. For most people, he was a respected freedom fighter, a man who attempted to bring what was the most underdeveloped Portuguese to self-determination. According to the most widely diffused version of events, Cabral was killed as a result of a well-orchestrated plot by the fascist police of *Estado Novo*, PIDE.¹ This particular narrative has appeased many consciences around world.² More recently, however, and thanks primarily to the work of a Portuguese and a Cape Verdean journalist, namely José Pedro Castanheira e José Vicente Lopes some light has been shed on the assassination of Cabral.³ Completely contradicting the allegation that PIDE were responsible for his death, this African revolutionary was, in fact, killed by his own comrades in the Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC). Moreover, not only a few individual members of the party who were implicated in the plot, but all the ranks of the entire nationalist organization.⁴

The controversy surrounding Cabral's death is useful for the purpose of this article. It illuminates the disjuncture between revolutionary hopes and postcolonial realities. More importantly, it conveys the kinds of readings of the past that our particular postcolonial present authorizes. The story that claims that Cabral was killed by the fascist police *made sense in the context* in which Guinea-Bissau was hailed the quintessential revolutionary war in Africa. But this was before the dream of independent Africa had started to unravel, as Frantz Fanon had so presciently warned us.⁵ In the wake of what has happened across much of Africa ever since the true story of Cabral's death has become more palatable. This is not simply because of the generalized attitude of pessimism towards Africa today. It is also due to the fact that nationalism in many places in Africa has failed to deliver its promises. This has allowed for a theoretical context in which Cabral's nationalist hopes can be contrasted to the (ethnic, for the purpose of this paper) realities of Guinea-Bissau today.

1 Polícia Internacional de Defesa do Estado – International Police and of State Defense.

2 For such a description of events, see, for example, Ignatiev, *Três Tiros da P.I.D.E.: Quem, Porquê e Como Mataram Amílcar Cabral*.

3 This work has been done by the opening of the PIDE's archive, in the case of the former, and the reevaluation of oral sources, in the case of the latter. See, for instance, Lopes, *Cabo Verde, Os Bastidores Da Independência*. Castanheira, *Quem Mandou Matar Amílcar Cabral?*

4 José Vicente Lopes, for instance, states that the killing of Cabral was an announced death in the sense that only the Cape Verdeans did not know that this was about to happen. The assassination was then perceived as the coup of Guineans element in the party against the Cape Verdeans. Lopes, *Cabo Verde, Os Bastidores Da Independência*.

5 See, Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, especially the chapter on the African Bourgeoisie.

In a nutshell, what I propose here is an attempt to deal with the basic question of Cabral's legacy: what are we to do with it? In my view, any response to this question must first attempt to answer another: how to read Cabral today? Addressing this question requires making a critique of Cabral that investigates the relationship between his revolutionary theories and his revolutionary practices. For such an understanding, one has to bear in mind the period when Cabral was developing his political activities. On the one hand, he was operating under the constraint of an ongoing colonial situation; on the other, he was already developing theory under the demands of postcolonial criticism that was emerging from the post-colonial experience of other African states. Again, considering Fanon may help illuminate this point. For Fanon was not only the most pertinent thinkers of colonialism, he was also the first theoretician to alert us to the pitfalls of national liberation. The reality Fanon describes, after visiting a number of African countries recently liberated from colonialism, was also available to Cabral. For example, the emerging reality that nationalism was failing to solve the ethnic question, and that, in many instances, the emergence of a national identity was leading to the little more than the construction of an arena in which various ethnic groups were vying for power.⁶ My point here, in brief, is that the long overdue reassessment of Cabral's thought is more productively undertaken by realizing that he was, to a great extent, a postcolonial theorist acting within a colonial situation.

This is not cheap criticism. I am aware of David Scott induction that "criticism cannot be understood as knowing omnisciently in advance of any cognitive political contingency or historical conjuncture what demand it has to meet."⁷ With this in mind, I am not critiquing Cabral merely on the basis of being able to write within an ideological field that equips me with an understanding of things that Cabral could possibly have known. To head off such potential criticisms of my own critique, it might help if I am very clear about my aims and intentions here. My critique addresses in particular the vocabularies we still elicit today to talk about revolution, and more generally, the process by which African countries were liberated from the yoke of colonialism. I owe this particular insight to David Scott. In his pathbreaking book, *Conscripts of Modernity* – which is about that classic of revolutionary thought, *Black Jacobins* – by C. L. R. James, he makes the contention that one of the predicaments that mars postcolonial criticism is the adoption of the "discursive spaces" that were once concocted to politically imagine the emancipation of the Third World. Scott mobilizes Hayden White on the question of historical emplotment, to suggest that the way out of this disjuncture is to read the classics of emancipation as tragedies. For this genre, unlike the romance (the dominant mode of emplotment in the narratives of the past's future that brought the present we live in), the tragedy, as a mode of emplotment, allows us to conceive of more fluid, contingent and less teleological futures' pasts.⁸

6 Mahmood Mamdani would locate this problem in the ways in which African political sphere was constituted through indirect rule. See, for instance, Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*.

7 Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism After Postcoloniality*, p.4-5.

8 *Ibid.*

I share Scott's overall preoccupation with the ways in which revolution, for instance, has been discussed largely without regard for the present situations these dreams brought about. But I part ways with him in his rather diachronic practice of reading. I have in mind a more synchronic protocol for reading Cabral which may yield more fruit. In this respect, I find it useful to mobilize Louis Althusser's reading of Karl Marx's philosophy, primarily, because Althusser and Cabral shared the same "ideological field,"⁹ which had as one of its modes of articulation the urgent demand to re-conceptualize Marx's thought. For example, Cabral's attempt to expand the concept of modes of production, as I will show later, operates within the demands of this ideological field. Secondly, Althusser, and his students, were engaged in the task of reading Marx in a way that was still relevant to the historical time they inhabited. I, too, am also interested in reading Cabral in relation to the *object* of his writing, being the *object*, not the history of knowledge it refers to, Marxism, as in *Reading Capital*, but *reality* itself.¹⁰ In brief, I am seeking a structure of the relationship between the visible and the invisible. My point here is to reconstruct the relationship between Cabral's writing and the reality about which he was writing. My questions here, as Althusser would have it, are: what could Cabral have seen that he did not theorize about? To what extent did the strategic point of view followed by Cabral (sometime we forget that his theories had a very particular end), prevented him from conceptualizing certain realities?

This is not merely a rhetorical exercise. Rather, this task is important for gaining insight into the ways in which we theorize our present, as I will discuss in more detail later. Furthermore, subjecting Cabral to this protocol of reading is more productive because Cabral has been deemed the theorist of practice. In this regard, for instance, Basil Davidson has written,

"But if one has to define a single influential aspect of Cabral's approach, perhaps it would be his insistence in the study of reality. 'Do not confuse the reality you live in with the ideas you have in your head,' was a favorite theme in his seminars for party militants. Your ideas may be good, even excellent, but they will be useless unless they spring from and interweave with the realities you live in. What is necessary is to see into and beyond appearances: to free yourself from the sticky grasp of 'received opinions' whether academic or otherwise. Only through a principled study of reality, of the strictly here and now, can a theory of revolutionary change be integrated with its practice to the point where the two become inseparable. This is what he taught. But the manifest fact that he practiced what he taught in all that mattered most, in whatever could be decisive, was another factor that convinced.11"

Reading Cabral urging his men to distinguish the real from that which they had in their heads, the question then becomes what did Cabral mean by reality. Moreover, how could

9 I borrow this from Althusser himself in the ways in which he defines ideological field. See, Althusser, *For Marx*, p. 70.

10 Althusser, *Reading Capital*.

11 Cabral, *Unity and Struggle*, p. xi.

Cabral have implicitly urged the militants in the party to act upon a reality outside their cognitive systems? I will come back to this question later. First, we need to consider the legacies of Cabral, who was the founding leader of the PAIGC, and who continues to be revered as the quintessential freedom fighter in Africa. This appreciation, however, does not take into account the present situations of the places for which Cabral struggled to help liberate. I am not talking about Cape Verde, which was marginal in the maneuvers of the national liberation movement. There were no battles on Cape Verdean's soil and, for the most part, Cape Verdeans were ignorant of what was going on in Guinea-Bissau. For Guinea-Bissau, however, the anticolonial war was the beginning of a dramatic post-independence period, complete with so many of the events that have characterized much of contemporary Africa – military coups, political assassinations, and political violence. Cabral witnessed many of these episodes during his travels through Africa – from 1960 to 1973.

The legacies of Cabral

The task of reconstructing Cabral for the critical purchase of our historical time requires starting with a negative perspective. The first thing to do is to ascertain whether or not the ideas that Cabral propounded are still useful. This exercise requires an examination of Cabral's revolutionary theories and practices against the backdrop of the worlds that his ideas helped to produce.

In the early 1960s, when Che Guevara was at his peak, until his dramatic death in Bolivia in 1967, one could argue that violence was a necessary step for oppressed people seeking self-determination. Jean-Paul Sartre could have written, for instance, in the introduction to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*: "Read Fanon: you will learn how, in the period of their helplessness, their mad impulse to murder is the expression of the natives' collective unconscious."¹² Fanon himself could have conceived of violence as this mythic force, for example when he writes, "violence, alone, violence committed by the people, violence organized and educated by its leaders, make it possible for the masses to understand social truths and give the keys to them."¹³

But the flow of history has changed direction: violence is no longer seen in the same way as it was. Today, Cabral may be understood as the last great and respected freedom fighter. To some extent, he was developing his ideas on the necessity of armed struggle just as they were losing their transformative appeal. Basil Davidson may have believed that Cabral had discovered something very important when he asked: "Whose were the keys that could unlock that seemingly unpassable door to freedom, to any useful unity and progress, and trample on its fortifications?" But the question that follows this "how far can the others use the same keys?"¹⁴ fell into a void. By the time of Cabral's death in 1973, there were very

¹² Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p.18.

¹³ Ibid., p. 147.

¹⁴ Cabral, *Unity and Struggle*, p. x.

few places in the world left to be liberated from colonialism. In this sense, Cabral had no followers. He could have drawn from the experiences of Mao in China and Guevara in Cuba, but he did not have many others to whom he could bestow his experiences of armed struggle in Guinea.

Moreover, even during Cabral's revolutionary life, choosing of violence was never easy. There were many other alternative non-violent methods. Cabral did toyed with these possibilities. Several years before giving the order to attack Tite in 1963 – the official beginning of war in Guinea – in August 1959, he, very discretely tried to mobilize the dock workers of Pidgiguiti to strike. This overtly pacific demonstration was violently dispersed by the Portuguese who killed tens of people. According to the history of the PAIGC, this was when Cabral ordered his men to abandon the country and look for shelter in neighboring countries, such as Guinea-Conakry and Senegal.

Unlike Fanon, Cabral never conceived of violence as an end in itself. For him, it was more a method of self-defense, for Cabral knew, better than any other nationalist, just how disruptive the effects of violence could be. Violence turned the party in to a war machine, leading many militants to use the authority bestowed by the party to pursue their private ends. Often Cabral reminded his men that the PAIGC was a political force, not a military one. In the 1963 Congress of Cassacá, for example, the party tried to address these questions, in a specific response to the fact that a number of the militants had been found to be terrorizing the population in the zones they controlled. Those accused of abusing the authority of the party were executed under the orders of Cabral.¹⁵

But, even if one accepts that violence employed by Cabral never reached the extremes defended by Sartre and Fanon, his approach still requires examination. Violence, as a means, has to be measured against the backdrop of the ends for which it has been used.¹⁶ In this regard, Cabral falls short. For him, violence was a means for the attainment of two ends: first, national independence, and second – almost subordinate to the first – the formation of a national culture. Here many objections can be raised. Armed struggle, in the context of the Portuguese colonies, let alone other European colonies in Africa, did not constitute the only path to independence. Take, for instance, the case of the MPLA in Angola. Agostinho Neto's movement was in complete shambles, with soldiers starving to death and the leadership consumed in fights for power. After Portugal's Carnation Revolution erupted in April 1974, however, Angola was granted independence.¹⁷ The Cape Verde situation is another a case in point. Cape Verde was part of the PAIGC's plan for independence. Cabral used to say that each bullet shot in Guinea had repercussion for the archipelago. Yet, if the independence of Cape Verde was fought on Guinean battlefields, by Guinean soldiers, this poses some critical questions about strategy, if not immorality too.

15 Tomás, *O Fazedor de Utopias*, p 179.

16 This is, at least, how Walter Benjamin conceptualized the use of violence. See, Benjamin, *On Violence*.

17 MPLA had to share sovereignty with the other two movements that fought the Portuguese, namely FNLA and UNITA.

The strategy for the liberation of Guinea and Cape Verde was built around Cabral's most controversial ideas, namely unity. For Cabral, unity was not only a matter of getting more people together to fight a powerful enemy, it also had dialectical implications. The war imposed on both territories, by subjecting both populations to the same hardships, would necessarily entail the harmonization of these two populations. This was Cabral's desire, but the reality was far from idyllic. Cape Verde and Guinea had never occupied the same place in the context of Portuguese colonialism. Cape Verde had never been, strictly speaking, a colony, and the people of this archipelago had never been subjugated to the infamous *Estatuto do Indígena* (Statute of the Indigenous). During a considerable period of the Portuguese presence in Africa, Cape Verdeans had enjoyed a kind of subaltern class strata. For several centuries, Cape Verdeans were the *de facto* colonizers in Guinea and Santiago (Cape Verde's largest island), even housed the Portuguese governor of Guinea.¹⁸ It was only in 1878, when Cape Verdeans troops were decimated in a battle against the Felupes in Bolor, that Portugal decided to formalize the 'independence' of Guinea from Cape Verde. In 1879, Portuguese Guinea was constituted as a colony and granted the right to have a resident governor, and publish its own *Official Bulletin*, just like all the other Portuguese colonies in the continent.

Nonetheless, those administrative changes did not prevent the Cape Verdeans from having a strong presence in Guinea. There are at least two reasons for this: first, rain in the archipelago was and always has been irregular and often famine would decimate hundreds of thousands of people; secondly, with its high temperatures and high levels of humidity, Guinea was one of the most testing of African territories for the white man. As a result, the Portuguese encouraged Cape Verdeans to migrate to Guinea, in order that they could do the colonialists' work, filling the many of the administrative positions.¹⁹

For many, Cape Verdeans and Guineans, therefore, the required unity among them was uncomfortable. Not even Cabral would have denied this. Indeed, if Cape Verdeans and Guineans had been equal, there would have no need to demand for their unity. But this desiring unity, for Cabral, was both philosophical as well as biographical, in the sense that he was attempting to link both ends of his nationality. There was a practical reason for it too. In the context of Portuguese colonialism – which demonstrated such appallingly low levels of social investment – Guinea was the most neglected of all colonies. Cabral said many times that when armed struggle began in Portuguese Africa, only 14 Guineans had ever benefited from higher education (and 13 of them were of Portuguese or Cape Verdean origin). Cabral, then, had to count on the Cape Verdeans to provide the cadres for the highest echelons of the party. However, throughout the war, only a hundred or so Cape Verdeans worked for the PAIGC. Few of them – if any at all – were assigned significant functions in the party other than basic bureaucratic tasks. For the most part, they lived in the party's headquarter

18 For an extended discussion of the presence of Cape Verdians in Guine, see my biography of Amílcar Cabral, *O Fazedor de Utopias*.

19 This was for instance the context in which Cabral was born, since his father was a primary teacher in Guinea. See, for instance, Cabral, *Memórias e Reflexões*.

in Conakry, running the schools, hospital, writing the pamphlets and radio scripts, but rarely venturing in to the *maquis*.

It is worth noting, moreover, that the unity between Cape Verde and Guinea was short-lived. After independence, despite the resentment between Cape Verdeans and Guineans – which is such a crucial factor if we seek to fully understand the killing of Cabral –, there was a timid effort to give political substance to Cabral’s dream of a supranational entity comprising all peoples in both territories. For example, Cabral’s brother, Luiz, a Cape Verdean, became the first president of Guinea, heading a government comprising many other Cape Verdeans. Yet, this pattern was not replicated in Cape Verde: Guineans did not integrate the government of the islands. On November 14th 1980, the Guinean guerrilla commander, Nino Vieira, supported by the army, successfully plotted a coup that ousted Luiz Cabral. For many observers, this coup is not only considered to be the end of political unity between Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau, but the second death of Cabral too.²⁰

My point here is not to criticize Cabral for events that unfolded after his death. A very creative and resourceful man, there is no doubt that he could have found solutions for the challenges that arose during the aftermath of Guinea’s emancipation. However, there is a continuation between Cabral’s proposals and their application, which need to be addressed. The point is to reflect on the fact that a significant number of the policies that Cabral had fought for, in the end, lost their critical purchase.

Reading Cabral

Up to this point, I have offered only a retrospective reading of Cabral’s legacy, the point being is that his legacy cannot be measured solely in terms of the liberation of Guinea. Nevertheless, this is not enough, to save myself from the accusation of a-historicism. In this section and in the one that follows, I will therefore undertake a different task. I will start by discussing the limitations of Cabral’s conceptualization of culture. I will then proceed by showing the extent to which Cabral’s understandings of culture prevented him from grasping more complex realities, such as those that came about in the juxtaposition between nationalism and the ethnic question in Guinea.

The thrust of Cabral’s understanding of culture is outlined in his essay *National Liberation and Culture*. This single piece of writing has enjoyed a certain currency within academia and is often read alongside Fanon’s piece on *National Culture*. Cabral’s essay was presented at the Syracuse University’s The Eduardo Mondlane Memorial Lecture on February 20th 1970, shortly after Frelimo’s leader, Eduardo Mondlane had been assassinated. The fact that the introductory remarks have been erased from later reproductions of this text reveal the extent

20 In the sense that the unity epitomized the biggest dream of Cabral, see, for instance, Conchiglia, “La deuxième mort d’Amílcar Cabral.”

to which Cabral's theoretical contributions have been discussed outside of the context in which they were produced.

Nevertheless, in this essay, his overwhelming preoccupation is with the Marxist concept of the modes of production. It is important to remember here that Cabral developed his theory at a time when others were attempting to re-conceptualize Marxist concepts, especially those derived from the modes of production. The most influential, and probably the most successful of these attempts, is found better succeeded of these attempts, is found in *Reading Capital* produced by Althusser and some of his students. This work, as Althusser has often insisted, was inspired by Lenin's view that Marxists should not apply Marx's concepts uncritically; indeed, they should extend them to new realities.²¹ Thus the concept of modes of production was scrutinized, since Marx a-historical characterization of the Asiatic modes of production fell short of explicating social and political-economic relations outside of the West.²² What is relevant in the context of this article, therefore, is Cabral's effort to explain the modes of production for the case of Guinea.

This was an urgent task. Marx asserted that the proletariat was the bearer of economic transformation. Reading Marx through Hegel, Lukacs expanded this insight, by articulating that the proletariat was the only class with the capacity to produce knowledge that reflected its own predicament as a class. In other words, the proletariat was the sole class with consciousness of itself. Implicit here was the understanding that in order to change a particular situation, first and foremost this was a question of objectively knowing a particular situation. This theorem posed challenges to many Marxist-oriented thinkers and revolutionaries, including Lenin, Mao, and even Fanon, whose preoccupation consisted of starting a transformative process in countries with a relatively inexpressive and small proletariat. Mao, and Fanon, especially, for reasons that interest us most, championed ideas in which the peasantry was conceived as the agent of change, and at the vanguard of the revolutionary process. This notion can help provide us with a framework in which to understand Cabral's *National Liberation and Culture*.

One of the most successful aspects of Cabral's conceptualization of the modes of production is that he does not equate this to ideology as many other Marxists have, but to something we would understand today as culture or society.²³ However, in order this understanding, Cabral had to conceive of a very particular concept of culture. In one single stroke, as any student of culture could not fail to realize, Cabral's concept of culture comprises a various forms of culture. On the one hand, culture is defined as behavior and behavior manifested in practices; on the other, however, culture is also material and cultural production, "works of art as in oral and written tradition, in cosmogonies and in music and dances."²⁴ In short, culture is

21 Althusser, *Lenine and Philosophy*.

22 For an interesting discussion of this lacuna, see, for instance, Spivak, *Postcolonial Reason*.

23 Dowling, *Jameson, Althusser, Marx* .:

24 Cabral, *Unity and Struggle : Speeches and Writings*., p. 148

simultaneously the “mode of production” as well as the visible product of the modes of production and the tangible manifestations of these invisible modes of production too.

In a rather simplistic formulation of the relationship in Marxism between base and structure, Cabral postulates the connection between the cultural and the economic factors, which allows him to conclude that “culture is the result (...) of economic and political activities, the more or less dynamic expression of the type of relations prevailing within that society.²⁵” So culture is “simultaneously the fruit of a people’s history and a determinant of history, by the positive or negative influence it exerts on the evolution of relations between men and his environment and among men or human groups within a society.²⁶”

Let’s us not lose sight of the fact that Cabral is seeking a more strategic understanding of culture. The looming problem in Cabral’s reflection is the way in which people resist the imposition of alien economic and political forms clinging on to their own culture as a means of resistance. Cabral thus elevates culture to the heights of history. For him, the point was not so much *historical* materialism, but something we might call *cultural* materialism. To put it another way, Cabral wanted to come up with a materialist conception of culture: “Culture, like history, is necessarily an expanding and developing phenomenon.” This thesis has also to be read as a form of revision, or possibly a departure, from the classical Marxist interpretation. For Althusser, for instance, historical materialism derives from Marx’s discovery of the mechanisms of historical change.²⁷ This is key to understanding the ways in which the proletariat, for instance, can stage a revolution through mastering the process of the evolution of the modes of production. But such a contention has raised questions for a number of thinkers, theorists and practitioners, including the African-American W. E. B. du Bois, who brought to center stage the question of the “people without history.”²⁸ For Cabral, as Aimé Césaire would argue, the deprivation of Africans from their own history is a temporary situation brought about by colonialism. This is the interval during which people cling to their culture – precisely because they have been deprived of their history. National liberation then becomes the process through which a people returns to the history that was interrupted by colonialism. This is the context in which Cabral states: “national liberation is necessarily an *act of culture*.²⁹”

The problem with this, however, is that Cabral disembowels culture – by defining this concept as being empty of its own content. Cabral, then, fails to conceive of culture outside the modes of production. The significance of this in asserting the weakness of Cabral’s theorization is the fact that it does not ascribe any autonomy to culture, since there is nothing permanent about culture and culture changes as the modes of production changes.

25 Ibid., p. 141

26 Ibid., p. 141

27 See, for instance, Althusser, *For Marx*.

28 Du Bois, *The World and Africa*.

29 Cabral, *Unity and Struggle*, p. 143

Cabral's formulations become even more problematic given that he does not provide a very good explanation for the cultural diversity of Guinea (let alone of Cape Verde, which he rarely alludes to in this particular text). During Cabral's, there were social groups that shared similar economic structures, but which displayed strikingly different cultural features. The way out of this conundrum was to conjure a "national culture," the umbrella-concept that would encapsulate all the differences and contradictions presented by the myriad individual cultures. Thus, national culture then becomes a kind of filter, a way to solve the many contradictions posed by diversity, by eliminating differences, and re-organizing a new totality: "the liberation struggle is, above all, a struggle as much for the conservation and survival of the cultural values of the people as for the harmonizing and development of these values within a national framework."³⁰

At this point, Cabral elaborates the relationship between culture and the role of the party intellectual, or – to use a Gramscian term – the organic intellectual. The work of the intellectual was reserved to the party members and ultimately, it was Cabral who was the uncontested thinker of the party. So party members were those militants endowed with a teleological vision that allowed the understanding of the mechanism for the harmonization of cultural difference. They were the only ones endowed with this capacity – to discern the direction in which history was moving and which, ultimately allowed them to understand the difference between the positive and negative aspects of culture. The party intellectual, then, is the one who determines, at a particular moment, what is relevant and what is not relevant for the formation of the national culture. National culture, therefore goes hand in hand with progress and development, congregating everything that is positive about culture.

These modes of totalizing cultural experiences, as I will show, present a number of problems, among which I would like to mention two: namely, the problem of resistance and the problem of assimilation. Firstly, Cabral seems to have no conception of the fact that people will fight to keep their own practices even if they are deemed negative by the party to which they otherwise adhere. Secondly, Cabral conceived of the armed struggle as a 'situation' in itself to which people adhere to by freeing themselves from the constraints of their cultural practices. To be fair, this was true up to a point. Many young Balanta, as we will see, joined the movement precisely so that they could escape the restrictions posed by the economic structures of their respective groups, for example in terms of accumulation of the wealth that would allow them to come of age as adult (which was only possible through marriage). But this did not allow Cabral to conceive of culture, as Marshall Sahlins would have it, as a dynamic structure ready to integrate difference and change.³¹

So, the question is: where does this deconstruction of Cabral's thought take us? If the point is merely to state that Cabral was wrong, or at least shortsighted in the way he conceived culture, the point then becomes to provide a yardstick. This is the task for the next section.

30 Cabral, *Unity and Struggle*, p.147.

31 Sahlins, *Islands of History*.

My point will be to show the extent to which Cabral's strategic understanding of the ethnic problem in Guinea opened up a number of ways in which counter-arguments on culture could be posed. As we will see, this was fundamental to Portuguese policies of counterinsurgency – by reverting the terms of the debates – from one on nationalism and nation-building to one on ethnicity.

Undoing Cabral

What I seek to do here is conjure up a structure of the visible. My main goal, as I have already outlined in the introduction, is to think of the ways in which Cabral arrived at his theories. To do this, it is necessary to read Cabral and to contrast his writing with the reality out of which he gleaned his theories. So this critique of Cabral must take into account he saw and what he could have seen. To do this, I will juxtapose Cabral's theories to the Portuguese counterinsurgency policies during the anti-colonial war. In other words, I intend to contrast Cabral's revolutionary practices, especially those that derives from his nationalism, with the ethnic responses produced by the Portuguese. This question has a great deal of contemporary resonance. More than ten years after the independence of Guinea-Bissau, Joshua Forrest made a similar critique of Cabral:

“The evolution of national-level conflicts since independence makes it clear that politics in Guinea-Bissau cannot be comprehended within the analytical frameworks of class and ideology, as had been suggested by Cabral, but must instead focus on the more politically salient factors of institutional, ethnic, and leadership competition.”³²

After the independence of Guinea, the various ethnicities that inhabit in the territories found in the state an open arena in which they could advance their causes. The *coups* and the moments of civil war that followed were to a great extent, based on ethnic allegiances. These problems did not solely erupt after independence only. They were there during the armed struggle, however because of the war, they had less room to become manifest. Moreover, the Portuguese were very effective in attempts to undermine the PAIGC's action – often by taking advantage of them. No one was better at this than general António de Spínola himself.

When general Spínola arrived in Guinea in 1968, the war in something of a stalemate. He was coming to replace general Arnaldo Schultz, who – despite using every means against the population including napalm for instance – had failed to improve the military situation for the Portuguese. Spínola was coming from Angola, where he had served as the commander of Calvary units. He had political ambitions too, so the war in Guinea could serve as another step toward his quest to become president of Portugal.

32 Forrest, “Guinea-Bissau since Independence,” p. 95.

Spínola brought with him a groups of loyal and ambitious officials, who were not only fluent in the theories of counterinsurgency – mostly produced by the British and the American’s counterinsurgency experiences – but, who were also familiar with the guerrilla manuals produced by Mao and Che Guevara. One of the most important changes introduced by Spínola was the realization that guerrilla warfare cannot be defeated solely by conventional military means. He realized that the response of the Portuguese needed to be political and social, and so he conceived the very ambitious social program, which he called “For a Better Guinea.³³”

Part of this program was the construction of infrastructure, including roads and bridges, in the colony where the Portuguese had invested less than anywhere else. Other measures, which pertain more to the subject under discussion, included the amnesty given to a number of political prisoners, including the vice-president Aristides Barbosa – considered a ‘historic’ prisoner by the propaganda of PAIGC. Some of these prisoners defected to the governor’s side, promising to work with him for a “better Guinea”. Many, however, returned to ranks the guerrilla movement, creating there a new problem. For many of these freed prisoners were, according to the party’s own rules, considered traitors, and should be sentenced with death penalty. By not acting in this direction, the PAIGC not only did not have anything to do against the corridor then opened between Bissau and Conakry, exposing many members of the guerrilla to the intoxicating propaganda of Spínola.³⁴

Spínola’s most ambitious plan in the social arena was the creation of the Congress of the People’s of Guinea. He construed the uprising in Guinea as the manifestation of old ethnic grievances, and the Congress would therefore be the forum in which to address those questions. Spínola’s way to undermine the PAIGC’s action was to emphasize the politics of differentiation, in clear contravention to what the Portuguese found better fit to undermine the guerrilla’s appeal.

When the Portuguese empire was threatened by the uprisings in Angola, in 1961, the colonial rulers decided to reinforce the politics of assimilation, hoping that this might head off further conflict. Adriano Moreira, professor of colonial law, and nominated minister of the colonies in 1961, had written a book called the *Administration of Justice to the Indigenous*, which promoted indirect rule.³⁵ Later, however, he proposed something rather different. He abrogated the infamous *Statute of the Indigenous*, which opened the way for everyone living in Portuguese to become *assimilado*. These measures were inspired by the work of the Brazilian anthropologist Gylberto Freyre who – in an attempt to explain the social personality and the formation of the Brazilian people –, suggested that Arab and Jewish heritage of the Portuguese is that had given the Brazilian people their cordial nature. The

33 Spínola, *Por Uma Guiné Melhor*.

34 One of the most important item of Spínola propaganda was the hatred against the Cape Verdeans.

35 For an understanding of indirect rule in Angola, see, for instance, Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*.

Portuguese appropriated these ideas to help them make the claim that they were building multi-cultural societies in Africa.³⁶ Spínola would backtrack on this.

For Spínola, one of the problems of colonial Guinea was the politics of assimilation – and the war was a manifestation of its disastrous consequences. The way to revert this situation was to enforce a sense of ethnic belonging and thereby counter the nationalism propounded by the guerrilla movement. The way to do this, was to activate the mechanisms for the formation of ethnic constituencies.

It is hard to tell the extent to which Spínola's understanding of the ethnic problem impacted on the guerrilla movement. But this is not my main concern. My point is rather that Spínola's understanding of the ethnic problem, even solely for strategic purposes, was closer to the social reality of Guinea than that which was promoted by Cabral under the premises of the modes of production. This becomes even more relevant when set against the backdrop of Cabral's understanding of class formation, which could not capture the complexity of the day to day lived experience of most Guineans.

Cabral was right, for example, when he defined the Balanta as the “motor of the revolution” for their enthusiastic adherence to the appeal of the national movement. During the period of the armed struggle, 80 percent of the military force of the PAIGC comprised Balanta. But the explanation Cabral gave for this fact was problematic. He thought that it was simply because the Balanta were those who had suffered the most during colonialism. They are known as rice-producers who inhabit the inhospitable areas of the South. They formed a stateless society and the Portuguese forces finally subdued them in the early twentieth century, imposing chiefs on them, normally from other groups, such as the Mandingo, but they were also forced into regimes of labor conscriptions.

But the question here is whether or not the Balanta had infiltrated the national liberation movement to pursue their own ethnic logics, or not. As Hawthorne has shown, one of the biggest challenges for a young Balanta is the access to land and the means of production, without which he is not allowed to form a family.³⁷ Although the Balanta do not have chiefs, they do have a social structure that is heavily gerontocratic, therefore the elders control the paths for accumulation. Hence, when the war started, the party became a way by which a young Balanta could have access to material goods without going through the normal process, hence the crucial importance of the age groups. According to Walter Hawthorne, the age groups were fundamental for production, especially for the “success of paddy rice monoculture.”³⁸ He continues, “because the labor demands of these tasks are so great, the members of a single household simply cannot accomplish them. Hence, tabancas [villages],

36 For an interesting discussion of the appropriation of Freyre's ideas, see, for instance, Castelo, *O Modo Português De Estar No Mundo*. Freyre was commissioned by the Portuguese to travel through the colonies, and the results of his observation is the book called, *Aventura e Rotina*.

37 Hawthorne, “Nourishing a Stateless Society During the Slave Trade: The Rise of Balanta Paddy-rice Production in Guinea-Bissau.”

38 Ibid., p. 17.

utilize age grades as a means of drawing people from different lineages together into structured work groups.³⁹”

Even more important is the fact that much of the war, as well as the location of the liberated zone, was conducted in Balanta territory. These areas of rice production were characterized by the natural accidents such as mangroves and swamps. Cabral often made reference to the fact that unlike many other places where successful guerrilla movements occurred, Guinea had no mountains. Nevertheless, nature did play an important part in the guerrilla war. The Portuguese army, for example, could not easily maneuver its tanks in these swampy areas, which were also protected, to some extent, from the full violence of bombings thanks to the rich and marshy vegetation.

But this, too, has its own historical foundations. The Balanta ended up living in these places precisely because of the expansion of the Mandinga Kingdom. The Balanta did not only thrive in these areas – by shifting their food production to rice, and adapting their economic structure to the new dynamics brought about by the slave trade, they also developed a number of techniques of war, learning successfully defend themselves against other groups, and for the purpose of cattle raids, for example. Some of these techniques were very similar to those that one encounters in many books about guerrilla warfare. Not surprisingly, the PAIGC absorbed the war machine of the Balanta, to the extent that many combat units derived from the logic and organization of the age groups. At the beginning of the armed struggle, Cabral has fought fiercely against these aspects of culture, which he called ‘negative practices.’ For instance, in the 1963 Congress of Cassacá, the PAIGC enacted a kind of cultural revolution in which Cabral gave the order for the physical elimination of those in the military who had turned themselves into warlords, thereby endangering the link between the movement and the people. Many of these party members arrived at the congress with their followers, who largely consisted of adolescent wives and *griots* singing about their military achievements. Later on, Cabral had to accept many of these practices for the crucial importance the Balanta played in the military structure of the party.

These two examples show the extent to which Cabral’s theoretical framework did not provide good answers for Guinea’s ethnic problem. So Cabral was wrong to suggest that the introduction of war and the submission of the population to the hardships of the war would by itself change social relation and foster the nation. It did change many things, but not in the direction Cabral had anticipated. The Balanta used the party for their own ends. By the time the war started, in 1961, the Balanta were the most isolated, marginal, and, as even Cabral would say, “backward,” of all the ethnic groups in Guinea. Today, the Balanta not only dominate the military as they also have important influence within the state.⁴⁰

39 Ibid., p. 19.

40 This ascension has been very well documented by Marina Temudo. See Temudo, “From the Margins of the State to the Presidential Palace: The Balanta Case in Guinea-Bissau.”

To conclude, let me briefly summarize the argument I am making. I begin by evoking the assassination of Amílcar Cabral, through which I was proposing a reflection on the disjuncture between the way Cabral continues to be remembered and the realities of the country for whose emancipation he fought. There is a tendency to mythologize Cabral as the leader of a successful revolution –if the yardstick of such a revolution is indeed Guinea’s independence –, but the truth is that his assassination is part of the contradictions that the national liberation movement brought about. The way I have tried to work on these contradictions is not only to discuss the extent to which Cabral got things wrong. For a diachronic assessment of Cabral would only reveal the privilege of history –in other words, with the benefit of hindsight that he did not and cannot have. I have tried instead to work through this in a synchronic way, looking at what Cabral could have known. This entailed the reconstruction of his epoch, by reading his theory of culture against the backdrop of the Portuguese counterinsurgency policies based on ethnic fragmentation, and the ethnic problem posed by the Balanta within the ranks of the PAIGC.

On a different note, I must also say that my critique of Cabral is not gratuitous. I have stated that postcolonial criticism should move away from a political and ideological stance to a more epistemological criticism.⁴¹ This is very important for the kind of theories our historical time demands. Cabral has been deemed as a theorist of the practice. He believed that theories did not have any use if they could not be explained to the peasantry. So he labored on his own theories by using the data available in everyday life. With this in mind, what I have tried to do is juxtapose Cabral’s theories with the reality that was available to him at the time. I have then posed the question: what could Cabral have seen that he did not see? My concluding contention is that this question – the same one that was asked by Althusser and his students of Marx – may still have some resonance today. Asking these basic questions when building our theories to explain our contemporary challenges may help us, I believe, to develop better ones.

⁴¹ I owe this insight to Mahmood Mamdani.

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