

SCHOLARLY REVIEW ESSAY

## Cabral and Revolution in Portuguese-Speaking Africa

Antonio Tomas. *Amilcar Cabral: The Life of a Reluctant Nationalist*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 272 pp. \$39.95. Hardback. ISBN: 9780197525579.

Peter Karibe Mendy. *Amilcar Cabral: Nationalist and Pan-Africanist Revolutionary*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2019. 238 pp. \$16.95. Paper. ISBN: 9780821423721.

In *Amilcar Cabral: The Life of a Reluctant Nationalist*, a translation and revision of his earlier Portuguese edition, Antonio Tomas addresses what he sees as a gap between the reality of the armed struggle in Guinea and the ways in which it has been discussed by all previous writers on the subject. He claims to base his critique on newly released archival information and recent publications on Cabral, Portuguese colonialism, and its anti-colonial movements in Africa.

The first issue Tomas takes up concerns Cabral's discourse. Tomas writes that Cabral would have expressed himself in a significantly different way if he could have spoken freely. The author criticizes scholars of the Portuguese liberation war and Amilcar Cabral who, he says, assume that Cabral expressed his own views about the liberation struggle without constraints. Instead, Tomas argues, Cabral was trying to express a consensus that aimed to negotiate between the different factions within his movement and organization. Scholars, Tomas writes, did not understand that Cabral was speaking within the context of internal democracy or the lack thereof, and that he aimed to negotiate a political consensus in the period and context of the Guinean national liberation movement.

Tomas further criticizes previous scholars for presenting Cabral as a highly conscious nationalist who was able to anticipate the course and configuration of historical events. They saw Cabral's leadership of the Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde) PAIGC as the fulfillment of his calling. Thus, political sovereignty would be the ultimate goal of his activism from its beginning in the late 1940s. Tomas criticizes those affirmations as pure fabrications, or as propaganda, that have been debunked in certain Portuguese publications. He argues that Cabral was not a highly conscious nationalist, and that political sovereignty and independence did not become primary goals until the 1960s.

Having claimed this weakness in previous scholarship, Tomas attributes it to a schism in the liberation movement itself between those who fought the war and those who raised support for the war and the independence of Portuguese

Guinea. Cabral belonged to the group in charge of promoting the war but did not participate in the fighting. In Tomas's view, Cabral was convinced that the independence of Guinea could be attained only by diplomatic actions. Therefore, he spent a considerable part of the anti-colonial war travelling around the country and spoke of events in an optimistic way, depicting the revolution and national liberation in Guinea as a path to modernity for Guineans. Tomas criticizes Western writers on Cabral and the Portuguese national liberation war for simply repeated Cabral's discourse, either intentionally or unintentionally. According to Tomas, this lack of critical analysis suppresses complexities within the liberation movement, which he sees in Cabral's constant absence from Guinea, the resentment against him and other Cape Verdeans within the movement, and his alienation from the everyday experiences of freedom fighters.

One of Tomas's major claims is that Cabral decided to embrace the clandestine life and commit to the liberation struggle, only after pressure from his Angolan comrades Viriato da Cruz and Azancot de Menezes. Tomas argues that Cabral took a job in his native land, Guinea, only after he failed to get a job in Lisbon or Cape Verde and had no other options. Tomas is not convinced that Cabral wanted to develop a nationalist movement in Guinea Bissau before 1960. He did not fully commit to the nationalist cause until 1960, when he moved to Guinea-Conakry, nor was he the first nationalist to attempt to rally Guineans in Cape Verde to support of the liberation movement. He formed his united front under the PAIGC umbrella by silencing nationalists who did not agree with him and/or by integrating them into the PAIGC ranks. As a consequence, he inadvertently increased anti-Cape-Verdean sentiments within PAIGC's daily operations. This became overt at the Cassaca congress in 1964, when Cabral was confronted with what he called later "negative cultural practices." Tomas argues that these are in fact cultural differences between those who identify as Guineans and those who identify more as Cape Verdeans. The question of cultural identity became more pronounced as the number of Cape Verdeans in the ranks of the party increased, particularly after 1966.

Another ambiguity that Tomas finds in Cabral's leadership concerns his awareness of the roles played by Cape Verdeans in the colonization of Guinea. The author analyzes Cabral's nationalism as caught up in the zone between empire and nation-state. He salvaged materials from the wreckage of empire to form two nation-states, Cape Verde and Guinea, related to each other as a by-product of Portuguese colonialism. Cabral saw colonialism as an ideology that masked social reality to colonized people. National liberation movements would help people understand that reality. In addition, Cabral understood culture, ethnicity, and class as products of material reality. If national liberation movements changed that reality, then culture, ethnicity, and class would automatically change accordingly. Tomas finds that Marxism provided Cabral a way to avoid having to deal with the internal ethnic and class conflicts within his movement. The longevity of the liberation war, demoralizing the combatants, led to the conspiracy against Cabral's leadership and ultimately to his assassination on January 20, 1973.

Despite downplaying Cabral's status as a leader and theorist of national liberation movements, Tomas holds Cabral as the most serious African

revolutionary. The reason is not the military successes, but the administration in liberated zones during a period and in a context where Afro-pessimism was developing elsewhere on the continent.

The problem with all these new insights is that Tomas decided to write this book “without inundating it with footnotes.” In fact, his book is without footnotes at all. But if he asserts that Cabral’s nationalism resulted from his friendships with nationalists in Angola, and his relocation to Guinea-Conakry, it becomes imperatively relevant to add footnotes that allow scholars access to archives, notes and data in order to verify these novel affirmations mostly unheard in the historiography of Amilcar Cabral and the Portuguese Guinea national liberation war.

Most writers on Cabral agree on the following points that Tomas contests (major authors include Basil Davidson, Gerald Chaliand, Amilcar Cabral, Mario De Andrade, Eduardo De Sousa Ferreira, I.T. Krautsova, David Andelman, Jean Claude and Marie Claude Lambert, Leopoldo Amado, Alan Bockel, Carlos Cardoso, Patrick Chabal, Ronald Chilcote, Mustafah Dhada, Pablo Luke Idahosa, Jock McCulloch and Peter Karibe Mendy): Amilcar Cabral was involved from his early childhood in anti-colonial struggles in Portuguese Guinea, Cabo Verde, and Portugal. He became a major nationalist, a charismatic leader, an influential political thinker, and a leading Pan-Africanist combatant. None of these writers present Amilcar Cabral as Antonio Tomas presents him: a product of Portuguese colonialism who did not see independence as a primary goal until the 1960s. Without citing his sources, Tomas makes the basis for his novel affirmations more problematic.

Further, on what basis does Tomas claim that Cabral was not speaking freely and that he would have spoken otherwise? Tomas does not present documentation to corroborate this argument. He upholds it by pointing out the potential divergence between nationalists and bi-nationalists, or between native Guineans and Cabo Verdean descendants, as well as other schisms internal to the nationalist organization. Many scholars have discussed these divergences, but without accusing Cabral of not saying what he really thought.

One such notable scholar is Peter K. Mendy. Two years before Tomas’s latest work, he published *Amilcar Cabral: Nationalist and Pan-Africanist Revolutionary*. Mendy writes:

The remarkable achievements of Cabral, who was an accomplished agronomist, an ardent nationalist, an astute diplomat, a brilliant military strategist, a committed Pan-Africanist, and an outspoken internationalist, became an enduring source of inspiration for me. As a revolutionary leader, Cabral remains as significant as his celebrated contemporaries, notably Mao Zedong, Frantz Fanon, Fidel Castro and Ernesto “Che” Guevara (p. 10).

Mendy, like his predecessors, has a very different view from that of Tomas on Cabral’s political commitments, leadership and charisma.

He writes that in 1945 Cabral left for Portugal as an agronomy student and graduated there in 1950. Cabral’s strong self-esteem enabled him to withstand the preconceptions and prejudices of his white colleagues. During this time in

Lisbon, as a member of the Casa dos Estudantes do Imperio (CEI), he became involved in electoral mobilization drives. He spoke at meetings, led meetings, and moderated discussions. Mendy presents Cabral's intensive, politically active student life in Lisbon as revolving around high-risk anti-regime activities under the close surveillance of the Policia Internacional da Defesa do Estado (PIDE). At the CEI, Cabral learned about the realities of colonial rule in Portugal's other African colonies. His access to radical literature on Marxism, Negritude, and Pan-Africanism deepened his knowledge of socio-historical phenomena and broadened his worldview. Cabral belonged to a generation of Africans who read the same books, discussed the same issues, and closely followed developments in other parts of the world (the Chinese Revolution, the USSR, and civil rights and Black power struggles in North America). Although Cabral and his colleagues imbibed the ideology of Marxism-Leninism, they committed to anti-colonial struggle rather than proletarian revolution.

Contrary to Tomas's argument, Mendy writes that Cabral was convinced that colonized people could truly be liberated only when they had regained their cultural identity. Thus, he also adopted aspects of Negritude. In this vein, Cabral characterized Cabo Verdean culture as essentially African.

Cabral returned to Portuguese Guinea in 1952 to work as an agronomist. He founded the PAIGC in 1956 and became a key player in the "political, military and diplomatic battles that had to be won in order to guarantee victory for the armed struggle that was launched in 1963 following unsuccessful attempts at peaceful decolonization" (Mendy 21).

Mendy finds Cabral's true genius in his ability to mobilize and inspire his compatriots, and in his ability to win over international opinion as to the righteousness of the armed struggle. On another major point, Mendy presents a view opposite to that of Tomas. Cabral, according to Mendy, played a significant role in establishing two of the most effective liberation movements in Angola and Mozambique (MPLA and FRELIMO). A committed Pan-Africanist, he was also a cofounder and spokesperson of the three successive coalitions of liberation movements in Portuguese Africa (the Anticolonialism Movement/MAC, the African Revolutionary Front for the National Independence of the Portuguese Colonies (FRAIN), and the Conference of the Nationalist Organizations of the Portuguese Colonies (CONCP). Cabral consistently expressed his commitment to and solidarity with "every just cause" in the world.

Mendy emphasizes Cabral's leadership accomplishments, and finds his historical importance as follows:

1. He competently organized and led one of Africa's most consequential armed struggles.
2. He skillfully mobilized more than twelve ethnic groups into a united binationalist cause.
3. He led a united front against Portuguese colonialism in Africa.
4. He wrote incisive essays and innovative books that still resonate today.

While Antonio Tomas affirms that Amilcar Cabral decided to join the African national struggle after he met the Angolan nationalists, Peter Karibe Mendy has a

different analytical perspective on Cabral's visits to Angola during the 1950s. Mendy recounts them as job-related. When Cabral returned to Lisbon for a job in 1955, a report by the colonial government about his sojourn in Portuguese Guinea was sent to the PIDE in Lisbon. This report highlighted his anti-colonial posture and his success with other Guineans in founding the Sports and Recreation Association of Bissau. In Lisbon, Cabral busied himself for the next five years with job-related work in Portugal and Angola. His first "consultancy work in Angola was for the Sociedad Agricola do Cassequel, a six month assignment to map the soils of the Catumbelo Valley" (93). He arrived in Luanda on August 29, 1955, and was shocked at the misery and racism imposed by the colonial power. Between 1955 and 1959, as Cabral conducted numerous studies in Angola, he saw the abject conditions of most Angolans. The experience led him to strengthen his commitment to anti-colonial struggle. Mendy affirms that with local Angolan nationalists, including Viriatu da Cruz, Cabral collaborated in the clandestine founding in Luanda of the Party of the Unified Struggle of the Africans of Angola (PLUAA) in November 1956. The PAI (African Party for Independence) in Bissau had already been created on September 19, 1956 (93–94). Mendy mentions Viriatu da Cruz as one of the Angolan nationalists whom Amilcar Cabral met but does not present him as influencing Cabral's commitment to revolution.

These two books make opposing contributions to the scholarly work on Amilcar Cabral. Mendy's book confirms previous scholarship on Amilcar Cabral and his role in the Portuguese Guinea liberation war, as well as in national liberation theory and practice more generally. Even though Tomas's book recognizes Cabral as a great leader, it challenges our understanding of his evolution, but without corroborating those challenges or allowing us access to his sources. The question is: Why?

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