

4-1-1975

The Road to Nationhood: Amilcar Cabral's Political Thought

Sulayman Sheih Nyang

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dh.howard.edu/newdirections>

Recommended Citation

Nyang, Sulayman Sheih (1975) "The Road to Nationhood: Amilcar Cabral's Political Thought," *New Directions*: Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 7. Available at: <http://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol2/iss2/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Howard @ Howard University. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Directions by an authorized administrator of Digital Howard @ Howard University. For more information, please contact lopez.matthews@howard.edu.

The Road to Nationhood

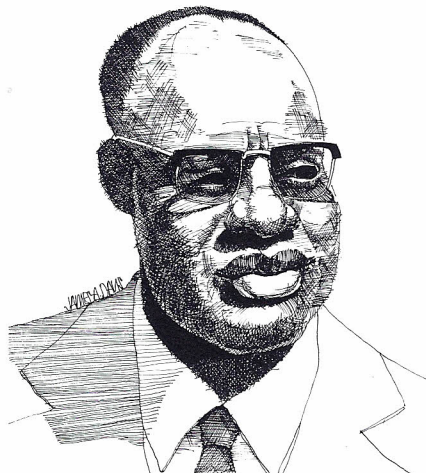
Amilcar Cabral's Political Thought

By Sulayman Sheih Nyang

18

“The laws and the daily realities of economic, political, social and cultural life to which the people of Guinea are subjected reveal that the people are the target of one of the most violent and best organized examples of oppression (national, social and cultural), and economic exploitation in the history of colonialism. This system of oppression and economic exploitation was introduced and built up in Guinea by force of arms.”

Amilcar Cabral



The independence of Guinea-Bissau is inextricably linked with the political and guerilla efforts of the late Amilcar Cabral. Indeed, it was Cabral who formed, led and directed the guerilla movement which came to be called the PAIGC (Partido Africano da Independencia de Guineae Cabo Verde).

This party of Cabral has been the most successful guerilla movement in Africa. The key to its success was the quality of its leadership and the responsiveness of the masses to the quest for independence.

The PAIGC was successful in its efforts largely because of its strategies and methods of guerilla warfare. As leader and strategist for this movement, Cabral combined both theory and practice in the struggle against reactionary forces. He was not the fanatical ideologue who imported theories and set out to concretize them without due regard to the peculiarities of his situation. Almost all students of Cabral now agree that his political ideas were theoretical formulations based on his experiences in the field. Cabral was an African intellectual who fought his battles for freedom both intellectually and practically.

So successful were Cabral and his followers that almost two-thirds of Guinea-Bissau fell into their hands long before Portugal conceded to African independence. In fact, Cabral and his movement declared the liberated areas independent of Portuguese rule a few years back. This *de facto* independence was in effect until August 26, 1974 when the leaders of the PAIGC and the revolutionary successors to the old regime in Portugal approved September 10, 1974 as Guinea-Bissau's official date of independence.

This agreement ended 11 years of guerilla warfare. During this period of bitter struggle, however, two major events of great importance took place. The first was the tragic assassination of Cabral in January 1973 at his Conakry home in the neighboring Republic of Guinea. The second was the overthrow of the regime in Portugal on April 25, 1974.

Prior to Guinea-Bissau's reconciliation with Portugal on the issue of national independence, many observers thought that Cabral's death would spell doom for the PAIGC.

Such a pessimistic view has since been negated by the turn of events. Luis Cabral, Amilcar's younger brother, has taken over the leadership of the party, and today Guinea-Bissau is a respected republic in the African continent. Luis Cabral and the other leaders of Guinea-Bissau are now in the process of building up new structures along the same lines that their fallen leader, Cabral, has set for them.

Theory of Colonialism

Cabral's ideas serve as an interesting legacy to Africa. His ideas, deeds and achievements put him in a special category of African and world thinkers.

In order to understand the nature and significance of his political thought, one would have to retrace Cabral's line of reasoning on the important question of colonialism. To Cabral, colonialism represented a very dangerous system of exploitation—a system based on these two devices: lies and violence. The former is the cause-result of dishonored treaties and broken promises, and the latter is the power with which to inculcate terror and fear in the minds of pre-colonial Africans.

Cabral captured the essence of colonial violence in the following passage:

“The laws and the daily realities of economic, political, social and cultural life to which the people of Guinea are subjected reveal that the people are the target of one of the most violent and best organized examples of oppression (national, social and cultural), and economic exploitation in the history of colonialism. This system of oppression and economic exploitation was introduced and built up in Guinea by force of arms.”

Aside the argument pertaining to the use of violence by the colonialists in taking over other peoples' lands, Cabral held 1

another theory. The Guinean revolutionary leader believed: that colonialism became successful in its attempt to dominate Africa and other areas of the world only because of its superior technology.

Such a technology, according to Cabral, "profoundly transformed the means of production, stepped-up the social organization of work and raised the standard of living of vast sections of the population." This created, perhaps for the first time in history, a world market which linked the human components of both the beehives of technological activities in the industrial areas of the Northern Hemisphere and the beehives of agricultural colonies from where raw materials were acquired in large volumes and transported to the industrial centers of the colonizers. Through this systematic process, Cabral believed, colonialism took the African out of his own historical realms and placed him in a Eurocentric historical drama. Hence, Cabral's claim that the anti-colonial struggle is the motive force of history today.

Cabral's thesis, therefore, depicts colonialism as being negatively positive in the development of mankind. This is so because its dialectical development had brought about a new mode of production whose development later altered the material universe of man while at the same time ushering a train of misery, pillage, crimes and the destruction of human and cultural values.

Cabral also linked the stagnation or ramification—to borrow a term from Frantz Fanon—of African culture to the colonial power. Such a power, according to Cabral, did not seriously infuse capital into the African economy in the same manner it had done in its own country. For this reason, Africans found themselves in a new socio-cultural system whose locus of power remained in Europe. This point was emphasized by Cabral as follows:

"In the colonized countries, colonization usually arrested the historical development of the people when it did not lead to their total or gradual elimination."

Here imperialist capital imposed new types of relationships within the indigenous society whose structure became more complex. It aroused, fomented, inflamed or resolved social contradictions and conflicts."

In his theory of colonialism Cabral saw the psychological aspects which Fanon so poetically painted for the benefit of those fortunate enough to escape colonialization but human and courageous enough to sympathize with those struggling against colonialism. But so corrupting was the Portuguese colonial system that even progressive individuals in Portugal got corrupted, according to Cabral, by the easy life of exploiting, dominating and psychologically crippling their African colonial subjects. And the color of Portuguese (white) skin was always sufficient to guarantee supremacy in the colonies. This state of affairs led most whites to be contemptuous of the feelings, rights, culture, civilization and just aspirations of the peoples of Guinea-Bissau.

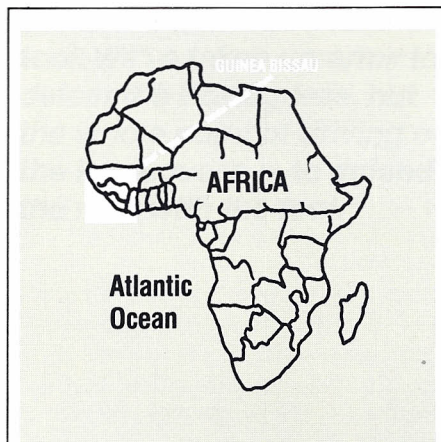
Cabral's theory of Colonialism, therefore, was born out of his own intellectual analysis of social structure of his country as well as a psycho-historical examination of his own life. He was the son of an African mother in Guinea-Bissau and a mulatto father from Cape Verde. In this respect, Cabral in his life time experienced the social, economic and psychological situations on both sides of the fence. As an "assimilado" he was closer to the corridors of power; was able to master the techniques of survival in such a paradoxical and at times humiliating role. Cabral also learned about the hardships and difficulties confronting an African trying to find his or her bearings within the confines of a colonial make-believe world of multi-racial coexistence.

I would suggest that Cabral in his early years was a peasant by empathy; later, he became a petty bourgeoisie by education and training; finally, a revolutionary leader of a guerrilla movement against the Portuguese.

Continued next page

"In the colonized countries, colonization usually arrested the historical development of the people when it did not lead to their total or gradual elimination. Here imperialist capital imposed new types of relationships within the indigenous society whose structure became more complex. It aroused, fomented, inflamed or resolved social contradictions and conflicts."

19



Guinea-Bissau occupies an area of 13,948 square miles between Senegal and the Republic of Guinea. Its population is estimated at 800,000.

When Western Europe set out to explore the rest of the world, Guinea-Bissau became one of the first settlements of Portugal in Africa. The Portuguese conquest of this part of Africa was not easy, for the African ethnic groups put up a fierce resistance against Portuguese encroachments. Things changed only when Portugal launched a large scale war against the peoples of the interior. Such a war proved successful because of several factors, among which was the fact that during this time the British and French colonialists were also using force to subdue other African peoples in the neighboring areas.

The inhabitants of Guinea-Bissau are divided into at least eight major ethnic groups. When Cabral and his associates set out to wage guerilla warfare against the Portuguese, they conducted serious studies on their society. They identified and analyzed all the elements which they felt could be of help to them in their war against Portuguese colonialism.

20 ***"If we accept the principle that the Liberation Struggle is a revolution and that it does not finish at the moment when the national anthem played, we will see that there is not, and cannot be national liberation without the use of liberating violence by the nationalist forces, to answer the criminal violence of the agents of imperialism."***

Theory of Armed Struggle

Since violence was the only means applied by European colonialists in their attempt to go beyond the equal relationships that prevailed before colonialism was institutionalized, it should then take no one by surprise that Cabral prescribed an ideology which invoked armed struggle as a means of restoring to the Africans their history and their culture. But not in all situations.

In 1962 Cabral told a special United Nations committee at Conakry that peaceful efforts in the forms of memorandum and an open letter were made in the hope of changing Portugal's policy in Guinea-Bissau but all these proved abortive.

On several occasions Cabral said if the Portuguese proved serious in their negotiation, armed conflicts would be put to an end. However, his familiarity with a series of Portuguese broken promises to African colonial subjects made it categorically clear that there were only two types of armed struggle: one in which the people are defenseless and are at the mercy of the heavily armed colonialist; the other in which each side is ready to face the challenge. The PAIGC, according to Cabral, accepted the second choice, knowing fully well that "there are only two possible paths for an independent nation: to return to imperialist domination (neocolonialism, capitalism, state capitalism), or take the way of socialism." This claim of Cabral is based on the assumption that the essential instrument of imperialist domination was violence and the colonized had no other choice but to turn to violence in order to put an end to subordination and humiliation.

Cabral has also maintained the position that armed struggle is the only opportunity available to the Guineans to reclaim their history. Hence, Cabral's much emphasized stance of allowing no volunteers from abroad in the field and leaving to Guineans to bear the burden of liberating (total liberation) their *land*, their *culture*, their *history* and their *people*.

Cabral knew the dangers of partial liberation and in his theory of armed struggle suggests the futility of an armed revolt that falls short of a revolution. He articulates this view well in the following passage:

"If we accept the principle that the Liberation Struggle is a revolution and that it does not finish at the moment when the national anthem played, we will see that there is not, and cannot be national liberation without the use of liberating violence by the nationalist forces, to answer the criminal violence of the agents of imperialism."

This Cabralian interpretation of the armed struggle must not be taken as a fetish for militarism. To the contrary: Cabral himself had said several times that armed struggle was just a means, and that its ultimate success was in the political spadework preceding the declaration of war on the enemy. Another point in the Cabralian theoretical matrix is the fact that the ultimate purpose of the struggle is not to erect an elaborate military organization, but to protect and defend the rights, aspirations and interests of those laboring for the nationally liberated country. Cabral summarized this basic principle of the liberation movement as follows:

"The armed struggle is important, but the most important thing of all is an understanding of our people's situation. Our people support the armed struggle. We must assure them that those who bear arms are sons of the people and that arms are no better than the tools of labor. Between one man carrying a gun and another carrying a tool, the more important of the two is the man with the tool. We've taken up arms to defeat the Portuguese, but the whole point of driving out the Portuguese is to defend the man with the tool."

In analyzing this aspect of Cabral's political thought, one may note that the most interesting point is the fact that he and his colleagues came up with an orig-

inal contribution to African guerrilla warfare. They did not blindly import ideas of others engaged in guerrilla struggles elsewhere in the world. Theirs was an original plan—a plan which took into consideration all internal and external obstacles and which was based on Cabral's approach to liberation. Even after his untimely death in the hands of assassins, the campaign for total liberation did not falter. It intensified. The struggle was enhanced by the political upheaval in Portugal and the transfer of power from the hands of ardent colonizers to new leaders who understood the futility of continuing a colonial war in Africa. The struggle for liberation succeeded. And the successful ejection of Portugal out of Guinea-Bissau demonstrates categorically that Guinians perhaps are the first Africans to truly liberate themselves. This is the legacy of Cabral to Africa, for though he died on the eve of victory his name is forever written in the annals of African intellectual history.

Theory of National Liberation

To Cabral, a significant difference was apparent between national liberation and national independence, with the former entailing transfer of political power from colonialists to Africans without any major structural changes in the inherited state; the latter, on the other hand, meaning total demolition of the colonial structures and the emergence of a new type of state system whose powers are totally mobilized for the reintroduction of the African peoples into history.

This difference was central to Cabral's ideas on national liberation. To follow his topic on this matter one therefore needs to remember that four related concepts constituted the matrix of his ideas of liberation: culture, regained history, the embryonic class structure, and neo-colonialism.

Culture, according to Cabral, is very important to a people, and this importance became evident during the liberation struggle. Although history has shown that it is not difficult for the foreigner to impose

his domination on a people, the fact remains, Cabral wrote, "whatever may be the material aspects of this domination, it can be maintained only by the permanent, organized repression of the cultural life of the people concerned."

Imperialism is undoubtedly dangerous to a people, distorts and destroys the cultural basis of their existence. To Cabral, such an imperialist power relied on violence so as "to destroy, or at least to neutralize, to paralyze [their] cultural life." With a strong culture of its own, a people could put up a fight against the invading forces of imperialism. Cabral's theory suggests that a people's culture is not only a *fact* of history but also a *factor* of history. And in the liberation process culture could either be a bastion and a bulwark of support for the nationalist forces or a booby trap that made the operations against the imperialists dangerous and hazardous.

To understand the cultural milieu within which the guerrillas operated, one must make an inventory of all the cultural groupings within the area of operation if one wished to provide political leadership to the masses, according to Cabral. In his view, such an analysis was imperative because in order for the movement to succeed its leaders must: "base [their] action upon thorough knowledge of the culture of the people and be able to appreciate at their true value the elements of this culture as well as the different levels that it reaches in each group. The movement must also be able to discern in the entire set of cultural values of the people, the essential and the secondary, the positive and the negative, the progressive and the reactionary, the strengths and the weaknesses."

Cabral felt culture must be politically analyzed in the new nation being forged in the battle fields where the ghosts of ethnicity faced gradual liquidation; culture to be the basis for a new identity of each guerrilla's being. The armed liberation struggle, according to Cabral, represented a veritable forced march along

"The armed struggle is important, but the most important thing of all is an understanding of our people's situation. Our people support the armed struggle. We must assure them that those who bear arms are sons of the people and that arms are no better than the tools of labor. Between one man carrying a gun and another carrying a tool, the more important of the two is the man with the tool. We've taken up arms to defeat the Portuguese, but the whole point of driving out the Portuguese is to defend the man with the tool."

“A thorough analysis of cultural reality does not permit the claim that there exists continental or racial cultures. This is because, as with history, the development of culture proceeds in uneven fashion, whether at the level of a continent, a ‘race,’ or even a society, the coordinates of culture, like those of any developing phenomenon, vary in space and time, whether they be material (physical) or human (biological and social).”

the road to cultural progress. Also, it eliminated the greater number of contradictions within the diverse ethnic, religious and cultural membership of the guerrilla movement. Therefore, the armed struggle “is not only the product of culture, but also a determinant of culture.”

When culture is used as an effective weapon against the imperialist power, the people in search of freedom and liberation are able to promote the development of a *popular culture*, the development of a *national culture*, the development of the *political and moral awareness* of themselves and the development of a scientific culture as well as a universal culture.

In explaining the need for the guerrilla movement's political usage of culture, Cabral warned that an inadequate understanding of one's cultural milieu could court disaster in the attempt to topple a colonial power. He attributed the failures of several guerrilla groups to their unwillingness to heed this fundamental principle of the struggle, because the colonial power had traditionally sought

ways of driving a wedge between the different groups within the colony.

Another aspect of this cultural aggression of the Portuguese is the one that is most dangerous to African civilization. This type of aggression is *historically* significant in that it forced the Africans out of their own history into another man's history. By planting themselves deep in African soil, the Portuguese reduced African cultures to objects of European manipulation. To insure their primacy within the African countries, the Portuguese saw to it that “those elites who were loyal to the history and to the culture of the people were destroyed,” Cabral wrote.

But this did not lead to the disappearance of African culture. What actually came about was the survival of this culture in the sanctuaries of the villages, the forests and the spirits of the living dead. Such a repressed, persecuted and betrayed culture must be re-discovered by the revolutionaries. Cabral's advice to his followers: “The greater the differences between the culture of the dominated people and the culture of their oppressor, the more possible such a victory becomes.” The victory referred to here is that won by Africans over the colonial power. Cabral, in his analysis of the strengths of culture in the fight against colonialism noted that Napoleon's failures in Europe were *inter alia* to a large extent due to his ignorance of the principle that it is much easier to dominate a people whose culture is similar or analogous to that of the conqueror.

Culture, according to Cabral, is an important element of a people. It is a useful tool with which they can reclaim their history and join the general body of humanity in the great drive for material and scientific advancement. This understanding led Cabral to the conclusion that culture is a function of history and the development of the productive forces of a society. He wrote:

“A thorough analysis of cultural reality does not permit the claim that there

exists continental or racial cultures. This is because, as with history, the development of culture proceeds in uneven fashion, whether at the level of a continent, a ‘race,’ or even a society, the coordinates of culture, like those of any developing phenomenon, vary in space and time, whether they be material (physical) or human (biological and social).”

This summation of culture as the function of history and the development of the productive forces is significant on two grounds. First, by it Cabral demonstrated that colonialism was symbolically a historical robbery committed by Europeans, and that Africans were by no means culturally bankrupt when compared to Europeans. In this connection, he argued: that Europe's talk of Africa's historical nakedness could only be true within the context of European cultural rape of Africa. In other words, Africa can only be historically naked because Europe, through the installation of colonial structures, tore off the historical garments of the African ancestors. Again, Cabral's conclusion is significant because it explains to Africans and Europeans alike the commonly misunderstood point that race and culture are separate and distinct, and that the European colonization of Africa was the result of their technological advantage, rather than their racial superiority. This important point sheds light on the pathologies that developed as a result of colonialism. Such pathologies, according to Cabral, represented functions of the deculturalizing processes that were ushered in by the colonial trains of abuses, pillage, misery and historical metamorphosis.

Besides his discussion of the role of culture in the national liberation struggle, Cabral had this to say about the relationship between the petty African bourgeoisie and the masses: This class of assimilated Africans, caught in a web of contradictions, could neither go past the barriers thrown up by the Europeans, nor

settle comfortably among the majority of Africans still attuned to the culture of their ancestors.

Because of these schizophrenic tendencies, the "assimilado" became a pawn in the hands of the colonial power; was used as an errand boy when circumstances called for it; was made the butt of European displaced cultural aggression because of his proximity to the nerve centers of the colonial power.

In his dealings with the African majority, such a man became at one breadth a replica of the European, but at another a superficial African. This conflicting psychological and psycho-cultural state of affairs put him in a very terrible condition, and for this reason some of his class members sometimes opted for an understanding with the masses. Whenever and wherever such a political breakthrough occurred the people got mobilized.

Two types of movements were organized by such a class of marginals. One type took a cultural approach to the solution of colonialism. In Cabral's view, this group responded to the challenges of colonialism by counterposing African culture against European culture. Men of this political stripe banked heavily on the uniqueness of Black culture and tried to make a political movement out of this claim for Black cultural uniqueness. Cabral opposed this approach to the struggle. He called for a careful analysis of culture, taking note of all negative and positive aspects.

To Cabral, the petty bourgeoisie constituted a paradox; though a creation of colonialism, it was destined to fulfill the role of mobilizing and organizing the masses for the struggle against the colonial powers. According to Cabral, colonialism did not allow the development of a vanguard class. Cabral neither accepted the Fanonian position that the African peasantry should be the spearhead of the revolution, nor felt comfortable with the Marxist claim that the Proletariat is the champion of the class struggle against colonialism. So he in-

vented the nation class, a key concept in the Cabralian vocabulary dealing with colonialism and imperialism. Colonialism – to Cabral – took the African out of his own historical realm and then plunged him helplessly into the alien historical drama of Europe. Colonial interruption of the development of the productive forces, therefore, put all the Africans in the same category, vis-a-vis the colonial power. Thus, it can be argued that the nation class is a socio-political and socio-economic category whose historical significance is determined by the colonial power. This is so, Cabral would say, because the common bond shared by the members of this class is the historical nakedness brought about by deliberate and systematic colonial manipulation of African history.

Cabral took this as a point of departure. He felt that the liberation struggle had to be a national venture of all groups. He recognized, however, the petty bourgeoisie's ability to seize the opportunity to lead the rest of society. This class represented a potential source of strength for the revolution, although without vigilance its members could gradually lapse into the abyss of political decadence and corruption. Cabral admonished his followers to watch this class very closely, for its members could easily turn to the process of embourgeoisification and self-enrichment. He put to rest any idea of a national bourgeoisie leading the struggle and dismissed suggestions that the liberation struggle be led by the revolutionary elements of such a class. In Guinea-Bissau, according to Cabral, there does exist two major geo-social groupings. In the rural areas, one finds the chief among feudal groups like the Fulahs, and common peasants among stateless groups like the Balantas. In the urban areas, Cabral identified the following groups: petty bourgeoisie, the "working class," the de'classe and the unclassifiable semiurbanites. In Cabral's view no stratum of society was equipped to lead the struggle all by itself. All members of

the nation class had to come together in order to set the nation free.

Cabral did not share Fanon's idea that the lumpenproletariat (in Cabral's terminology the de classe) was the material ally of the peasantry in the struggle against colonialism. On the contrary, he believed that the road to liberation passed through cities as well as towns and villages and that every one had a share and a role in the battle for independence and liberation.

Cabral, however, put a great premium on the re-Africanization of the petty bourgeoisie. On several occasions he warned his colleagues to avoid the pitfalls of bourgeoisie lifestyles, for this was the only thing that could jeopardize everything the revolution stood for.

Cabral was realistic enough to recognize that the petty bourgeoisie's position of command in the liberation movement was due largely to its education. In taking note of this historical reality he admonished his friends to be vigilant against some members of the petty bourgeoisie using the party as a Trojan horse to buttress and protect their class interests. Cabral's analysis led him to his famous phrase that in order for the revolution to succeed, the petty bourgeoisie must commit *class suicide*.

The idea of neocolonialism was much opposed by Cabral. To him such a state of affairs contradicted the very aims and aspirations of the national liberation movement, and he wished not to see anything of this nature develop in Guinea-Bissau. Repeatedly, he would argue that there was a difference between a country that had national independence and a country committed to total and uncompromising demolition of colonial structures. Cabral felt that the armed struggle, based on a correct analysis of the cultural, historical and social experience of a people, could help develop the necessary psychological, psycho-political and psycho-historical foundations for a new identity and a new nation. □

Sulayman Sheih Nyang, Ph.D., is acting director of the African Studies Department at Howard University.