

Amílcar Cabral as a Promoter of Pan-Africanism

The occasion of the 40th anniversary of the assassination of Amílcar Cabral, gives us the opportunity to celebrate the contribution of this great pan-African to the unification process of Africa. This is especially significant as 2013 was also the year in which we celebrated and reflected upon fifty years of the history of the African Union (AU) and its predecessor, the Organization of African Unity (OAU). The commemorations evolved around the desire for a more affirmative ownership of the development processes by Africans themselves. Agenda 2063, launched by the African Union with the support of the Economic Commission for Africa and the African Development Bank, is supposed to be the rallying point for a new vision that will help Africans define what they want for the next fifty years.

Having been fortunate as an impressionable young man to have served under the tutorship of Mario de Andrade, to see myself now involved in developing a pan-African ideal for 2063 is both enriching and thrilling. These current circumstances make me return over and over again to the never-ending source of Cabral's knowledge. However, I do this with the full awareness that Cabral's hagiography may not always be a recommendable path. Cabral is important because he always fought against the societal tendency to use an aura of mystery as a means to ensure people forgot about a hero entirely. It is worth quoting him:

During the great revolutionaries' lives, the oppressing classes reward them with never ending persecutions (...). After their death, they try to make them harmless icons, they canonize them, so to speak, surrounding their name with a certain aura, in order to "comfort" the oppressed classes or nations, and to mystify them-, doing so, they empty the revolutionary doctrine, depreciate it and destroy its revolutionary strength (Cabral 1976).

With this same level of awareness and respect, I will present some arguments that may allow better understanding of how Cabral first embraced and thus helped to conceive the Pan-Africanist ideal.

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1. Pan-Africanism as ideology

According to Thandika Mkandawire, the relation between the African intellectuals, Pan-Africanism and nationalism is, at the same time, symbiotic and contradictory (Mkandawire 2005). Ali Mazrui adds that one can imagine intellectualism in Africa without the Pan-Africanism but the opposite is not possible. Joseph Ki-Zerbo, in turn, says that the African nationalism had been from the beginning influenced by the Pan-Africanist concept, without which it would be meaningless. Ki-Zerbo also infers that without its national liberation dimension, Pan-Africanism would be an absurdity. This means that it is impossible to talk about Pan-Africanism without referring to the intellectuals that conceived it. They are the protagonists of the political formulation that led to nationalism and national liberation (idem).

Henry Sylvester Williams first outlined Pan-Africanism. His main idea was to defend black people all over the world against abuse and exploitation. Another American man, W. E. B. DuBois, revisited the idea but added the question of rights to the concept. When George Padmore from Trinidad, and Kwame Nkrumah from Ghana, later joined Du Bois, Jomo Kenyatta from Kenya, and Dudley Thompson from Jamaica to jointly plan and hold the Pan-African Manchester Congress in 1945, their manifesto was centred on the urgency of African independence. Nkrumah himself would go through several phases of political evolution on his thought about Pan-Africanism. The formation of the OAU in May 1963, when Nkrumah was already the President of Ghana, marks the birth of a more pragmatic and less idealistic idea of Pan-Africanism, in spite of its proclamation of complete integration of the continent. Between Du Bois's vision and the Jamaican Marcus Garvey's vision, the debate is still polarized: with

some wanting rights, and others wanting struggles (Devés-Valdés 2008).

The young Africans who, during the same period, used to meet in Lisbon in the Centre for African Studies and were committed to what they called 're-Africanization of their spirits' in the pursuit of the aspirations of the Manchester Congress, were testimony that the influences were not confined to the Anglophone protagonists or to the cultural movement of the Harlem Renaissance. Amílcar Cabral and his companions read Jorge Amado and the Brazilian social literature, the socialist thinking edited in Brazil, and discovered the magazine *Présence Africaine* and its spreading of negritude and the so-called Black poetry.

In *Présence Africaine* the polarizing debate is rather between Léopold Sédar Senghor, who promoted a Pan-African ideal based on ideas, culture and aesthetics, showing that Negritude is a value that integrates a universal whole and without which Pan-Africanism would have no meaning or coherence, a sort of counterpoint to the Hegelian principle; and Aimé Césaire, from Martinique (who seems to be the creator of the term 'Negritude'), who, due to his connections to the French Communist Party,¹ brought more political content to the concept.

In 1947, the Senegalese Alioune Diop founded *Présence Africaine* in Paris. Six years later, Mário de Andrade, the group's 'librarian' who used to gravitate around the Casa dos Estudantes do Império in Lisbon, with its main intellectual figures being Francisco José Tenreiro (from São Tomé e Príncipe) and Amílcar Cabral himself, connected with Alioune Diop in the search for networking, rather than employment. Later, he became the Secretary of Alioune Diop and in this role he participated in the organization of the first Congresses of African Writers and Artists in London, Paris and Rome.

The struggles for independence were now taking shape. The ones that were most noticeable were those that arose as a result of their protagonists being in the limelight, such as Ghana, Kenya or Sékou Touré's

Guinea; although the prime influence came from the Algerian FLN. All, without exception, refer to Pan-Africanism; nevertheless clear divisions were later to echo in the process of creating the OAU, between the moderate ones in the Monrovia group and the more radicals in the Casablanca group.

Amílcar Cabral extended his fronts of intervention beyond just Guinea and Cape Verde, during his period of mobilizing. The African Revolutionary Front for Independence (Frente Revolucionária Africana para a Independência) and, after, the Conference of the Nationalist Organizations of the Portuguese Colonies (Conferência das Organizações Nacionalistas das Colónias Portuguesas) were originally created by Amílcar Cabral. After him, it was Mário de Andrade who led both organizations in their objectives and intellectual work. These were more accurate ways of bringing an organizational structure to their ideals – clearly Pan-Africanist.

The ideological framing of Pan-Africanism was done with a wide range of actors. Among these Amílcar Cabral emerged as an important intellectual common denominator in the 1960s. His interpretation of Pan-Africanism separated itself from the racial vein. Actually, since its beginning, Pan-Africanism struggled with two strong but contrasting domains: geography and race, the continent or the black personality. The genesis of the concept was built by a diaspora deprived of its umbilical link with the African land. It was therefore natural that a major importance would be given to the racial factor, defining the black subject as a common denominator of the Pan-African goals. In the United States and, consequently, in the Caribbean, *jus sanguinius* had always prevailed over *jus solis* in all the power distributions.

According to the great Palestinian thinker Edward Said,

“the mind needs order, and order is achievable by registering and discriminating everything, placing everything that the mind is conscious about in a safe and easy place to track, therefore giving things a role in what the economy of both objects and identity that form an environment is concerned” (Said 1997) This means that abstract constructions such as race and geography are human creations that enable the definition

of alterities: the ‘us’ versus ‘them’. Brought to the political dimension, these constructs are the prototype of an ideological definition, which is seen as the human manifestation of a deep belief or the proclamation of a positioning in the power scale.

Cabral soon understood the risks of a racial deriving of the Pan-Africanist principles. His declarations about the struggle for national liberation not being a struggle against the Portuguese or the white people, his pedagogical explanations about the so-called African clothing and traditions not being so different from those of other people in other historical moments are widely quoted. His permanent concern was not to indulge in the debate of colouring Pan-Africanism; otherwise he chose to define the national liberation struggle as a cultural factor, since it was a demonstration of the peoples’ ability to retrace their paths in history.

Pan-Africanism and culture

With Cabral, the relationship between culture and history has such a degree of sophistication that one can find it in all the current books about African philosophy (Hallen 2002). His contribution stands out because of the originality in the use of Marxist categories of analysis, never mimicking Nkrumah and other leaders of that time. Cabral refused labels and used to position himself without any inferiority complex. He was refined.

Another possible comparable figure, remarkable at that time, might be the Caribbean-born Algerian Frantz Fanon. It seems that Cabral was highly influenced by the psychiatrist, who had played a crucial role in the ideological setting of FLN. At least three concepts thoroughly used by Cabral have a direct correlation with the prior postulates developed by Fanon: the definition of unity, the lack of ideology in Africa and the struggle for the place in history.

Fanon was seriously concerned about the interpretation of the reasons for the disunity and contradictions within the struggle. At the end of his life he got severely disappointed with Nkrumah – he went to represent FNL in Accra after the independence of Ghana. He wanted to quit his function in Accra, preferring to leave the city comfort and headed to the North of Mali, to support the Front (it

seems curious that nowadays one fights battles in the same places that have nothing to do with this prominent history). Said says that *“the epistemological error of fundamentalism is to consider that the “foundations” are a-historical categories, not subjects of, and therefore out of the critical scrutiny of the true believers, that one assumes that accept them in good faith”* (Said 1997). In fact, the struggle against fundamentalisms explains the concern of both Fanon and Cabral about unity.

In the process of analyzing Lumumba’s difficulties to unite those fighting for independence in Congo, Fanon observed that it would not be possible to have one Africa fighting against colonialism and another African colluding with the agents of colonialism. His last book *Les damnés de la Terre (The Wretched of the Earth)*, published in 1961, Fanon elaborates about the economic cooperation of Nigeria in Liberia or the integrative political cooperation between Mali, Guinea (Conakry) and Ghana, as examples of unity (Adi/Sherwood 2003).

Following on from this, Cabral devoted the essential message in his political writings to the question of unity. His analysis of various types of resistance weakens, in a pedagogic way, the contradictions between several interests of both group and class in Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde. The concept of a unified Guinea-Cape Verde itself, within the major Programme of the PAIGC, is justified by the historical reality and by the wish of unity coherent with Pan-Africanism. Cabral knew well the Capeverdean nativist strand, refractory to a purely African identity, but he would despise it as a classist expression.

In what relates to the lack of ideology, it was a question of proving the need for own will, an ongoing debate, nowadays used with a new cloth: ‘appropriation’. In fact, it has to do with the same commitment claim signed by the three entities, ECA, AfDB and AU – the one that I referred to in the beginning of this article.

Cabral managed to explain in a graphical form the question of unity, as something that has to be based on the inside. It is worth quoting him:

When the African people put it simply that “no matter how hot is the spring

water, it does not cook rice", he enunciates, with shocking simplicity, a basic principle, not only from physics but as well from political science. In fact we know that the direction of a moving phenomena, no matter its external condition, depends mainly of its internal characteristics. We also know that in the political sphere, not matter how beautiful and attractive the reality of others might be, we can only truly transform our own reality on the basis of its concrete knowledge and on our own efforts and sacrifices (Cabral, 1976).

In 1960, from Accra, and a year before his death, Fanon earlier wrote that the major problem that threatened Africa was the fact that the African bourgeoisie that came to power thought that it was possible to make politics like one does business – he was referring to the absence of its own ideology (Adi/Sherwood 2003). Fanon also explained racism in the same way. For him, it was another expression of the inability to see past the present: the proof of hierarchy imposed by the colonizer in order to consolidate his control; but also a way of both rejection and destruction of the culture of the colonized. It was an ideological weapon of denial, of the non-acknowledgement of the other's place in History. Cabral revisited this topic and turned it into one of the basic principles for his explanation of the national liberation fundaments: the search for a place in History, and thus, a supreme demonstration of a people's capacity to validate his culture. Cabral says that: 'our peoples, no matter their stages of economic development, have their own History' (Cabral 1976).

These indirect dialogues between the intellectual achievements of Fanon and Cabral have influenced the third generation of Pan-Africanists, although it has not been possible to close the debate about these questions. One still revisits the same topics, with the precariousness of a major lack of knowledge of the Pan-African narrative itself.

Pan-Africanism and the identity issue

According to Claude Dubar, identity is not what is necessarily identical, but rather the result of an identification contingency. It is a mix between differentiation and generalization. The

former one – differentiation – has to do with the individuality of a person or of something in relation to something else. The second one – generalization – has to do with the common denominator of a whole. The identity paradox lies in the fact that it is also unique to be what is shared. One can only solve this paradox taking into account the common element of both operations of differentiation and generalization: the identification from and for the other (Dubar 2000).

The meaning of all of this is that identities vary according to the context, and, of course, according to History. As human abstract constructions, they represent a portrait of a specific moment or period. Applying it to the debate on Pan-Africanism, this means that the identity construction that takes territory or race into account can change according to realities. Nothing is static in identity. The media evolution and the reach of the new ways of contacting and networking, strengthen the plural identities. For this same reason, Pan-Africanism offers a completely different reading from the 1950s. At the same time, Pan-Africanism still offers an appealing door to the past, serving as a political reference and even as an anchor to better set the demands of development that is based on a major regional integration.

In Europe one refers to the European spirit or project, in Asia to the Asian values, in the Arab world to the Arab Spring. These are contemporary forms of identity valorization. Pan-Africanism was prior to all of them, maintaining an extraordinary reference force. The reasons of this longevity may be found, partially, as Said refers, in the fact that: '*imaginative geography and history help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself through dramatizing distance and difference between what is close to here and what is far*' (Said 1997). Pan-Africanism has been changing along time, maybe due to its historic path, but also by its own success, as an ideology, as an identity issue.

Cabral and Mario de Andrade were concerned about identity as a way of making a mockery of the Pan-Africanism ideology, right from an early stage, alerted by the totalitarian derivations of Sékou Toure, Nkrumah and Kenyatta. In order

to protect the movements associated to these risks, Cabral and Andrade increased their pleas for a popular and direct democracy. This democracy has shown to be a weak response to the tendencies that were earlier revealed as very strong.

Cabral's famous strong appeal for the small bourgeoisie suicide must be read as a euphemism to confess the derivations of the nationalist movements, or their misuse. In fact, it was about an indirect confession that the historical process, an expression much in use during the 1960s, would walk its own path. And so we have arrived at the present moment, where only the present main protagonists must be accountable for the choices that concern us. Cabral played his part. Let's play ours!

Note

1. Which he later denounced as unable to transcend its own prejudices.

Mário de Andrade can be credited as the one who brought together the intellectuals of the Cabral generation (as Mário de Andrade affectionately called them) and the movements around *Présence Africaine*.

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