

AMÍLCAR CABRAL AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY IN POST-INDEPENDENCE GUINEA-BISSAU AND CABO VERDE

INÊS NASCIMENTO RODRIGUES

nesrodrigues@ces.uc.pt

She is a tenured assistant researcher at the Centre for Social Studies (CES), University of Coimbra (Portugal), and vice-coordinator of the research line Europe and the Global South: Heritage and Dialogues. Her research sits at the intersection of memory studies, postcolonial theory, and the cultural history of forced labour in African archipelagic contexts. She is currently principal investigator of GHOST: The Afterlives of Contract and Enslavement. Narratives on Indentured Labour between Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe, funded by a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Global Fellowship (2024–2027). Her doctoral research on the Batepá Massacre in São Tomé and Príncipe was awarded the CES Prize for Young Portuguese-Speaking Social Scientists. She serves on the editorial boards of *Práticas da História* and *Cadernos de Estudos Africanos*.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8088-0201>

MIGUEL CARDINA

miguelcardina@ces.uc.pt

He is a historian, professor at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Coimbra (Portugal) and researcher at the Centre for Social Studies. He was an European Research Council (ERC) Grantee, with the project «CROME - Crossed Memories, Politics of Silence. The Colonial-Liberation Wars in Postcolonial Times» (2017-2023). He is the author or co-author of several books, book chapters, and articles on the dynamics between history and memory; the processes of historicization related to colonialism, anticolonialism, and the colonial wars; and political ideologies in the 1960s and 1970s. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5428-457X>

Abstract

This study examines how Amílcar Cabral's legacy has been constructed, disputed, and reconfigured in Guinea-Bissau and Cabo Verde since independence. Through an analysis of monuments, official commemorations, political speeches, public debates, and youth and artistic mobilisations, it situates Cabral's figure within broader processes of nation-building, political legitimisation, and historical narration. It asks why the memorialisation of the same founding figure took such different forms in the two states born of the struggle he led and links these trajectories to the international conjunctures – Cold War alignments, structural adjustment, democratisation – that shaped state formation in both countries. The article argues that Cabral functions as a central mnemonic reference through which state actors legitimise authority and shape narratives of unity, while younger generations and diaspora groups reactivate his legacy as a language of critique in contexts marked by political instability, neoliberal reform, and social inequality. Rather than eroding his symbolic status, these competing appropriations reaffirm Cabral's enduring relevance as a living political framework through which contemporary actors articulate claims for social justice, democratic accountability, and alternative futures.

Keywords

Amílcar Cabral; politics of memory; state formation; Cabo Verde; Guinea-Bissau.



Resumo

Este artigo examina o modo como o legado de Amílcar Cabral tem sido construído, disputado e reconfigurado na Guiné-Bissau e em Cabo Verde desde as independências. Através da análise de monumentos, comemorações oficiais, discursos políticos, debates públicos e mobilizações juvenis e artísticas, situa a figura de Cabral em processos mais amplos de construção nacional, legitimação política e narração histórica. Questiona-se por que razão a memorialização de uma mesma figura fundadora assumiu formas tão distintas nos dois países nascidos da luta que ele liderou, relacionando estas trajetórias com as conjunturas internacionais – alinhamentos da Guerra Fria, ajustamento estrutural, democratização – que moldaram a formação do Estado em ambos os países. O artigo defende que Cabral funciona como referência mnemónica central através da qual os atores estatais legitimam a sua autoridade e moldam narrativas de unidade, ao passo que as gerações mais novas e certos segmentos da diáspora reativam o seu legado como linguagem de crítica em contextos marcados pela instabilidade política, pela reforma neoliberal e pela desigualdade social. Longe de erodirem o seu estatuto simbólico, estas apropriações concorrentes reafirmam a relevância duradoura de Cabral enquanto quadro político vivo a partir do qual atores contemporâneos formulam reivindicações de justiça social, responsabilização democrática e futuros alternativos.

Palavras-chave

Amílcar Cabral; Políticas da Memória; Formação do Estado; Cabo Verde; Guiné-Bissau.

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INÊS NASCIMENTO RODRIGUES

MIGUEL CARDINA

Introduction

In one of the most emblematic scenes of *Nha Fala*, directed by Flora Gomes (2002), a bust of Amílcar Cabral is carried through city streets as windows and shutters close against its passage, refusing to shelter it. Through this scene, the Bissau-Guinean director signals the contested memorial terrain that, in both Cabo Verde and Guinea-Bissau, shapes how Cabral is remembered: the anticolonial leader who led the independence struggle for both territories, and whose legacy remains, more than fifty years later, a site of dispute. The film ends in Mindelo, on the island of São Vicente in Cabo Verde, at the square where a statue of the Portuguese navigator Diogo Afonso, celebrated as the island's 'discoverer', still stands. There, a bust of Cabral not only comes to life and levitates into the air, but it also displaces the navigator from his plinth and stands in a different orientation. As Kelly Mendes Lima (2011) observes, while Diogo Afonso faces the ocean (and, by extension, Portugal), Cabral directs his gaze toward the city and its people. Flora Gomes not only critiques the discomfort that Cabral's image has aroused in both countries but also challenges it: memorial ambiguity, the film suggests, does not diminish his legacy. It keeps it alive and open to reconfiguration.

This tension between official commemoration and popular reappropriation is the article's central concern. By "politics of memory" we mean the State and social processes through which historical events, figures, and narratives are selectively institutionalised, used and contested to serve present political ends. We examine the memorialisation of Amílcar

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Cabral in both countries – through homage, open contestation, and relative omission – by analysing how his figure has been inscribed in monuments, political discourse, popular evocations, and public performances. We argue that Cabral's symbolic status functions as a central mnemonic reference through which state actors legitimise authority and shape narratives of national unity, while critics and younger generations mobilise it as a language of dissent. Two questions organise the analysis: why did the memorialisation of the same founding figure take such different forms, broadly consensual and dispersed in Guinea-Bissau, openly partisan in Cabo Verde, and what does this divergence reveal about the conditions, domestic and international, under which postcolonial states secure its political-symbolic legitimacy? In answering them, the article makes a twofold contribution. Empirically, it offers a systematic binational comparison of Cabral's post-independence memorialisation. Analytically, it argues that mnemonic change and political change moved together, and that neither can be explained in domestic terms alone: each reconfiguration of Cabral's memory tracked an international conjuncture, from Cold War alignments and structural adjustment to post-1989 democratisation and the global antiracist mobilisations of the present decade.

Amílcar Cabral is not the only postcolonial founding figure whose legacy has been simultaneously institutionalized and contested. The selective memorialization of independence-era leaders is a well-documented feature (e.g. Ahlman, 2017; Angelo, 2020; Fouéré, 2009; Harsch, 2013; Martins, 2021; Werbner, 1998). As Fouéré (2009) demonstrates in her analysis of Tanzania, the production of an official public memory involves the systematic collaboration of media, state actors, and commemorative ritual to fix a single, morally simplified image of the founding leader in the national imaginary while organising silence around everything that complicates it. This dynamic is never politically neutral. As Werbner (1998, p. 15) argued, what appears as historical contestation is always also a dispute over virtue, legitimacy, and the criteria by which leaders are judged. Marschall's analysis of commemorative monuments and statues in post-apartheid South Africa extends this insight into the material sphere: by celebrating heroes through public statues and heroes' acres, postcolonial societies construct "a genealogy, a chosen ancestry – not in biological but in ideological terms" (Marschall, 2006, p. 177). This literature has had little to say, however, about founding leaders assassinated before independence whose postcolonial states subsequently fractured. Monaville (2019, p. 22) states that the dead Lumumba became "a more tractable uniting reference" because he was no longer accountable for governance, yet his afterlife unfolded within a single national framework. Assassination before decolonization, the binational scope of an independence project, and the political rupture between successor states remain untheorized in combination.

It is precisely here that Cabral's case offers comparative leverage. His assassination before independence spared, in part, his memory from direct association with the failures of postcolonial governance. The binational scope of his project, and its subsequent fracture, created two memorial contexts in which his figure was pulled in different directions simultaneously. Yet comparatively little academic attention has been paid to the public evocation and mobilization of Cabral's figure in the specific contexts of Guinea-Bissau and Cabo Verde, or to the memory disputes that have attended the re-signification of his image in both countries over the past fifty years (for some exceptions see Barros and Lima, 2012; Barros and Lima, 2021; Barros et al., 2024).



Amílcar Lopes Cabral was born in 1924 in Bafatá, Guinea-Bissau, to Cabo Verdean parents, trained as an agronomist in Lisbon, and became the principal architect of the *Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde* (PAIGC), one of the most internationally celebrated anticolonial liberation movements of the twentieth century. His assassination in Conakry on 20 January 1973, months before Guinea-Bissau's unilateral declaration of independence, transformed him into a martyr-founder of singular moral authority. In both Guinea-Bissau and Cabo Verde, Cabral was consecrated as "Founder of the Nationality": his effigy appeared on banknotes and coins, his birthday and the date of his assassination were enshrined as national holidays, and his name was attached to youth organizations, training institutes, and public institutions (Cardina and Rodrigues, 2022, pp. 25–26). The early post-independence years confirmed and actively deepened this status, though not without a degree of political management that would have consequences later.

The states that inherited this legacy were formed under tight international constraints. Like most polities born of decolonisation, they entered a world partitioned between rival great powers, in which the solidarities and imaginaries of the so-called "Third World" supplied both resources and limits for nation-building. Frederick Cooper's characterisation of the African state that emerged from this conjuncture is apposite: "the post-colonial gatekeeper state, lacking the external coercive capacity of its predecessor, was a vulnerable state, not a strong one" (Cooper, 2002, p. 5). State formation in Guinea-Bissau and Cabo Verde unfolded within precisely these constraints, and the symbolic economy built around Cabral's memory became one of the few political resources the new states fully controlled.

The PAIGC deployed Cabral's image with deliberate intent: to legitimize the new (binational) State, to construct a narrative of revolutionary continuity, and to conceal the significant tensions that independence had not resolved, namely those between Cabo Verdean and Guinean factions, between the party leadership and the population, and between the ideals of the liberation struggle and the realities of governance (e.g. Chabal, 1983a, 1986; Lopes, 1987; Forrest, 1987; Roque, 2016). These tensions were rooted in a structural asymmetry that preceded independence by decades. Under Portuguese colonial rule, a chronic shortage of trained personnel had led the administration to rely heavily on Cabo Verdeans to staff its bureaucracy in Guinea-Bissau: by 1936, half of all mid-level functionaries and around seventy percent of civil servants were Cabo Verdean (Forrest, 2003, p. 169). For sectors of the Bissau-Guinean society, Cabo Verdean authority was therefore not a novelty introduced by the liberation struggle but a continuation, in a different political register, of a familiar colonial arrangement. The PAIGC's leadership, largely drawn from Cabo Verdean milieus whose educational formation and social networks set them apart from the largely rural, ethnically diverse Guinean population, inherited this association rather than transcended it (Chabal, 1983b, pp. 202–203; Coutinho, 2017, pp. 27, 54–61, 91–3; Forrest, 1987, pp. 100–101; Rudebeck, 1974, pp. 14, 40–1, 115). Little of this was visible from outside. During the liberation war and the first years of independence, Guinea-Bissau attracted considerable international attention and sympathy, the product of a successful anticolonial campaign and of widely admired social and political experiments in which international actors themselves took part. Teresa Almeida Cravo (2023) describes a promising proto-state, and a new country received by the international community with confidence and optimism, representations far removed from the "failed



state” imagery that would attach to it decades later. It was against this backdrop of external goodwill that domestic tensions did their corrosive work. In Guinea-Bissau, a nativist political discourse gave political form to the resentment this generated, positing an authentic Guinean belonging against which the Cabo Verdean leadership of the PAIGC could be cast as foreign, as an internal colonialism substituted for the external one (e.g. Vieira, 1980–81; see also Lopes, 1987). That this discourse served the interests of specific political actors, above all those who would go on to lead the 1980 coup, does not diminish its social traction, or its lasting consequences for how Cabral’s legacy was subsequently managed in each country. What matters here is that it set in motion the very backlash it was designed to prevent: the moment when the consensus fractured, and Cabral’s legacy became a terrain of contestation rather than a source of uncontested legitimacy.

Understanding why this happened requires attending to the logic of what we term “mnemonic legitimation” in postcolonial states more broadly. Founding figures function as symbolic anchors: when they precede the compromises and failures of actual governance, their authority can be invoked without being tested against a record. In contexts of political instability or contested legitimacy, state and non-state actors reach for these anchors not arbitrarily but because they condense, in a single figure, the moral authority of the independence struggle, the promise of national unity, and the claim to speak for a people rather than a faction. What distinguishes Cabral from comparable founding figures, and what makes the two cases examined here analytically productive, is that this symbolic resource was simultaneously available to competing actors in structurally different political contexts. In Guinea-Bissau, Cabral’s status as founding martyr has, at least on the surface, largely retained a consensual character that cuts across political divisions: his figure has rarely been the object of open contestation. In Cabo Verde, by contrast, his figure has become entangled in multiparty competition, making his memorialization a sharper and more openly contested terrain. This structural variation, as much as the intentions of individual actors, explains the divergent trajectories traced in the sections that follow.

Decabralization And Post-Coup Forgetting

The fracture came from two directions almost simultaneously, and in each case the mechanism was instructive. In Guinea-Bissau, the coup d’état of 14 November 1980, led by then-President of the People’s National Assembly and Commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces João Bernardo ‘Nino’ Vieira, ended both the PAIGC’s political hegemony and the project of binational unity with Cabo Verde. The coup’s architects justified their action in explicitly Cabralist terms, invoking his values and objectives as having been betrayed by the existing leadership and framing the military takeover as a restoration of the revolution’s original promise. The argument, in its sharpest form, held that the PAIGC had been captured by a Cabo Verdean elite whose interests and cultural formation were alien to the Guinean majority, and that independence had delivered not liberation but a change of masters (Vieira, 1980–81; see also Nóbrega, 2003).

By invoking Cabral while dismantling the institutional structure of binational unity, the coup’s architects performed a precise ideological operation: they separated Cabral from the Cabo Verdean leadership that claimed to embody his legacy and repositioned him as a martyr betrayed by that same leadership. This reflects a structural feature of postcolonial



legitimation in which the founding figure's authority is so central that even those dismantling his institutional legacy must claim to act in his name. But it also explains a paradox that would define Guinea-Bissau's memorial landscape for decades: Cabral's symbolic status could remain broadly consensual precisely because this nativist logic had detached his memory from the Cabo Verdean political project and regrounded it in the liberation struggle itself, which no actor could afford to repudiate. Yet the practical effect was the opposite of what the rhetoric suggested. According to Koudawo (2001, pp. 202–3), the coup marked the victory of the military wing over politics, directly contradicting the principles Cabral had advocated, above all his insistence on the primacy of political over military leadership and on the liberation struggle as a project of social transformation rather than mere armed seizure of power. What followed was, as Koudawo (2001, p. 132) terms it, "the disintegration of the heritage of the period of the liberation struggle": Vieira's subsequent assertion of "presidential Bonapartism" (Fernandes, 1994) concentrated power in ways that structurally contradicted Cabral's own political thought, even as his name continued to serve as legitimizing cover. Cabral's image was thus preserved in rhetoric precisely as his legacy was dismantled in practice, a dissociation between name and content that would deepen over the following decades.

In Cabo Verde, the rupture took a different form and proved no less consequential for Cabral's public memory. After the coup, the Cabo Verdean wing of the party reconstituted itself as the PAICV (Partido Africano para a Independência de Cabo Verde), inheriting a fragile position: on certain islands, the PAIGC had never fully taken root, owing to the complex relationship between key social sectors, the project of unity with Guinea-Bissau, and the contested legacy of "Africanity" (Anjos, 2002; Costa and Sarmento, 2014; Fernandes, 2002; Barros, 2008; Trajano Filho, 2009; Almada, 2012). International conjunctures compounded this domestic fragility. Across the decade that followed, the unravelling of the Cold War order dissolved the alignments within which the PAICV's single-party model had been legible, while the ascendancy of neoliberalism and the conditionality attached to multilateral lending redefined what a small, aid-dependent archipelago could plausibly pursue. Liberalisation, moreover, began inside the party itself: from the mid-1980s the PAICV adopted a development model of economic extroversion, and, as Koudawo observed, economic and political liberalisation appeared intertwined, propelled by international pressure, the erosion of single-party authority, and a well-established Catholic Church (Koudawo, 2001, cited in Cardina and Rodrigues, 2022, pp. 61–62). The legislative, presidential, and municipal elections of 1991, all won by the opposition, turned this conjuncture into political and, as the next section shows, mnemonic change (Cardina and Rodrigues, 2023).

Across the archipelago, the PAIGC never related to Cabo Verdean society uniformly, and the mnemonic transition that followed traced pre-existing social and geographical fault lines rather than overwriting them. On Santiago, where the agrarian legacies of slavery and land concentration ran deepest and the party's rural roots ran strongest, popular attachment to Cabral proved most durable and post-independence mobilization in his name most vigorous: the *rabelados* and the *Marxa Kabral*, discussed below, are Santiago phenomena. São Vicente, tied to Portugal by long histories of emigration, kept a more ambivalent distance from the Guinean dimension of the PAIGC's project; it is no accident that Christian Rationalism, with its spiritualist reading of Cabral, flourished precisely there.



The *Movimento para a Democracia* (MpD), after 1991 the principal vehicle of anti-Cabralist politics, drew on a longer current of Cabo Verdean self-understanding that emphasised Creole singularity and kept the PAIGC's Pan-Africanism at arm's length (Anjos, 2002; for a detailed discussion of these disputes, see Cardina and Rodrigues, 2022, pp. 39–42, 132–4). The contested character of Cabral's legacy in Cabo Verde is therefore legible not only in the chronology of political transition but in this uneven social geography: islands, classes, and communities for whom his figure meant different things from the outset.

When the PAICV lost decisively in the multiparty elections of the early 1990s, more changed than the party in office: the terms on which national identity and historical legitimacy could be publicly claimed were themselves recast, in what we have elsewhere called a "mnemonic transition" (Cardina and Rodrigues, 2021). The MpD government did not attack Cabral head-on; his symbolic standing ran too deep for that. Instead, it gradually dismantled the symbolic apparatus surrounding his legacy, removing his effigy from banknotes and coins, abolishing his birthday as a national holiday, and replacing the anthem that carried his lyrics. Taken one by one, each gesture could pass for administrative normalisation or democratic renewal; together, they de-centred the anticolonial past as the primary reference for national identity. What Márcia Rego (2015, p. 77) calls "de-Africanization" worked by substitution rather than erasure, exchanging one set of national symbols and commemorative anchors for another that stressed Cabo Verde's creole particularity and its Atlantic and European connections over its ties to continental Africa. Cabral was not abolished but displaced: from the centre of national memory to one contested figure among several.

Even so, new homages followed: in 1995, a bust of Cabral was inaugurated in Santa Catarina, in the interior of Santiago, near the house where he grew up, and in 1996 a statue was erected at the international airport on Sal, which also bears his name (Cardina and Rodrigues, 2022, pp. 104–105). In Praia, on 5 July 2000, the twenty-fifth anniversary of independence, a memorial offered by the People's Republic of China was inaugurated: a small museum at its base, a bronze statue roughly three metres tall at its summit. The figure wears the iconic *sumbia*, yet it holds a book and is wrapped in a heavy trench coat, stiff in posture and distant from the bearing associated with the liberation struggle; sectors of the population, comparing it to statues of Asian political leaders, found it unsettling (Cardina and Rodrigues, 2022, p. 124). The memorial's location prompted similar reservations. In June 2020, Gilson Varela Lopes, a young Cabo Verdean based in Luxembourg, petitioned online for the removal of the statue of the Portuguese navigator Diogo Gomes, which stood beside the presidential palace in Praia, where the mnemonic transition described above had returned it. Gomes, the petition argued, was "a navigator who also trafficked slaves part-time"; the demand drew explicitly on the international wave of criticism of colonial statues and on the antiracist protests that surged worldwide after the murder of George Floyd in the United States. In place of Diogo Gomes, the petition proposed, should stand a statue of Amílcar Cabral.³

Turning to Guinea-Bissau, the coup gave rise to Nino Vieira's growing consolidation of power, against a backdrop of recurring political turbulence, the structural adjustment programme initiated by the World Bank and IMF in 1987, and regional disputes with

³ Text of the petition retrieved from <https://peticaopublica.com/pview.aspx?pi=PT100526>.



Senegal and Guinea-Conakry (Temudo, 2008, p. 249). Although Nino Vieira professed a return to Cabral's ideals, substantive change remained limited. The process of commemorating Cabral through monuments in Guinea-Bissau was equally fraught with delays. As José Neves and Leonor Pires Martins (2024) describe in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Amílcar Cabral: uma exposição*, Cuba gifted Guinea-Bissau a statue of Cabral in 1985, sculpted by Lázaro Calvo from memory, drawing on Cabral's stay at a Havana hotel during the Tricontinental Conference. Upon arrival, however, the statue was placed in storage at the Amura Fort, where it remained for two decades, until May 2009, when it was finally installed at a roundabout near the airport in the Bissau-Guinean capital.

Taken together, these two trajectories illuminate something that a focus on either country alone would obscure. In both cases, Cabral's symbolic figure proved simultaneously indispensable and unstable: indispensable because the moral authority of the liberation struggle remained the primary source of political legitimation in the post-independence decades, and unstable because that authority could be claimed by competing actors with opposing agendas. The forms this instability took, however, differed fundamentally according to political context. In Cabo Verde, where the democratic transition produced a functioning multiparty system and institutional continuity, the contestation of Cabral's legacy was largely managed through official channels: electoral politics, state symbolism, and legislative decisions. The "decabralisation" of national memory was, in this sense, a controlled and incremental process. In Guinea-Bissau, where the authority over Cabral's memory was more dispersed across political and social actors, his legacy circulated more freely in non-state spaces: youth movements, music, urban art, and the kind of grassroots political mobilization that the following sections explore. The paradox is that this relative dispersion may have preserved the critical and transformative dimensions of Cabral's legacy more effectively than the managed commemorations of the Cabo Verdean state, precisely because no single actor was able to domesticate it. What the comparison reveals, in other words, is that the relationship between political context and memorial politics is not linear: stronger institutions do not straightforwardly produce more robust or more faithful engagements with the founding figure's legacy. They produce more controlled ones.

Other Representations of Cabral: Between Cult and Fraud

The representations of Cabral examined so far operate largely within the registers of official commemoration and institutional politics: monuments, holidays, party discourse, and the strategic mobilization of his name by state and para-state actors. Yet alongside these, and often in tension with them, a parallel set of memory practices has taken shape that operates below and beyond the state. These vernaculars, syncretic and, at times, millenarian appropriations of Cabral's figure exceed the frameworks of formal political culture. They transform Cabral from a historical actor into a mythological presence – a redeemer, a spirit, even a god – whose power derives precisely from his removal from the compromised terrain of actual governance. What follows traces three distinct but related manifestations of this memorialization in Cabo Verde: the mythological testimonies from



the colonial period, the *rabelados* communities of Santiago, and the Christian Rationalist movement on São Vicente.

One structural condition underlies all three of these vernacular appropriations and helps explain why they took such intense form specifically in Cabo Verde: Cabral never returned to the archipelago after leaving as a student (Tomás, 2021). His adult life was spent in Guinea-Bissau, Lisbon, Conakry, and international diplomatic circuits. In Guinea-Bissau, Cabral was a known physical presence; fighters had met him, heard him speak in the liberated zones, and followed him in combat. His memorialization there remains in some respects tethered to living memory. Mythologising registers were not absent in Guinea-Bissau, where Cabral also entered legend; but in Cabo Verde they assumed a more elaborate form, one his structural absence likely did much to enable: the demigod who appears in disguise, the Messiah glimpsed in rural communities, the astral president who communicates from beyond death are all figures generated by longing for someone who was no longer physically there. His very distance made him available for a kind of imaginative investment that proximity would have complicated.

The quasi-mythological dimensions of Cabral's presence in the social imaginary predate his assassination and exceed the memorialisation produced by the state, media, and the political sphere. Cláudio Furtado noted the existence of a "mythical memory" associated with the revolutionary, according to which it was common, "in the Cabo Verdean rural world and even during the colonial situation", to "hear that Amílcar Cabral had appeared in such and such localities" (Furtado, 1997, p. 18). Pedro Martins, arrested at the age of nineteen for his underground political activities in Cabo Verde and held at the Tarrafal prison⁴ until the release of political prisoners on 1 May 1974, remembers him this way:

[Cabral] had achieved a magical and paternalistic stature as a demigod, a defender of the people who, disguised as a priest, a sister of charity, an old man, etc., would appear everywhere in Cabo Verde to see with his own eyes the suffering of the people, in order to encourage them in the fight against Portuguese domination. Any stranger who was not identified was often regarded as 'Amílcar' who again passed in disguise. This protection was not limited to Cabo Verde but also extended to São Tomé and Angola where he would see the suffering of the 'contratados' [workers, often forcibly recruited, who were bound by exploitative labour contracts to work on colonial plantations in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries]. [...] The will of the people to free themselves from the yoke of exploitation, and their anxiety to be close to the leader who had already achieved enormous prestige and popularity, but who was hundreds of kilometres away from the islands, led them, in their simplicity, to make him a mystical figure (Martins, 1995, p. 174).

Cabral thus emerged as a longed-for presence, a spectre who revealed himself to the rural poor most exposed to the violence of colonial exploitation in unexpected and varied disguises, precisely because his physical presence was so distant. His power lay in the

⁴ On Tarrafal prison, one of the most potent symbols of political repression under Portuguese rule, see Barros (2009) and Lopes (2010).



ability to transcend his corporeal condition, appearing at unforeseen times and places to alleviate the suffering of the population.

A further manifestation of these dynamics is the distinctive appropriation of Cabral by the *rabelados*, rural communities in the interior of Santiago Island who maintain their own religious practices and a long history of resistance to the state, among whom Cabral is venerated and, at times, deified.⁵ Contacts with the PAIGC during the liberation struggle are poorly documented, but appear to have run through the movement's underground militants (Martins, 1995, p. 174; Querido, 2013, pp. 191–2). What makes this appropriation analytically distinctive is not its religious intensity but the social logic it encodes. A community constituted by refusal – of the Catholic Church, of the colonial state, of successive governments' integrationist pressures – the *rabelados* incorporated Cabral into a sacred cosmology not as conventional political loyalty but as an act of sovereign interpretation, taking from his legacy what served their own framework of resistance and discarding the rest. That legacy, this suggests, has never belonged exclusively to the state or the party but circulates in registers that formal political culture neither controls nor fully comprehend.

The testimonies are consistent. Visiting the community of Espinho Branco in 1974, Euclides Fontes found a millenarian group whose leader, Nhô Fernando, saw Cabral as "the Messiah who would join them, the chosen people, to save Cabo Verde after centuries of suffering and oppression of all kinds" (Fontes, 2018, pp. 348–9). At Nhô Fernando's death in 1979, the newspaper *Voz di Povo* wrote that, in "their mystique", the *rabelados* considered Cabral "the black God they always dreamed of opposing to the European religion brought by the colonizers" (*Voz di Povo*, 1979, p. 8). Decades later, Rego (2015, pp. 146, 151) found the same veneration in attenuated form: some consider Cabral divine, others a man of exceptional qualities; asked whether Cabral had been seen in his community, the leader "shrugged, gave a half-smile, and uttered a suspenseful 'who knows'". As a member of the community put it in 1995, "Amílcar Cabral did not die [...] Jesus did a faith-based work and Cabral performs a practical one" (cited in Carvalho, 2020, p. 102).

A very different context produces a structurally similar move. Christian Rationalism, a spiritist current originating in Brazil in the early twentieth century that gained significant presence in Cabo Verde, particularly on the island of São Vicente, regards Cabral as a superior or "light spirit" (Vasconcelos, 2004). In one of its branches in Mindelo, he is considered an "astral president", acting as a kind of spiritual guardian of the centre, where he is said to appear frequently to transmit messages (Cardina and Rodrigues, 2022, p. 141). These representations of Amílcar Cabral reflect the construction of a myth around his figure, elevating him to the status of a deity. This mythologisation contrasts, however, with the critical and often anti-Cabralist perception that some Cabo Verdean intellectual and political sectors hold of his legacy. Amado (2012), addressing the complexity of Cabral's image in Cabo Verde's sociopolitical context, identifies three distinct representations: as a fraud, as an icon, and as a theorist-ideologue.

The first representation constructs Cabral as a 'fraud', articulated primarily by intellectuals linked to the right and shaped by post-1991 party political disputes. The biographical

⁵ On the *rabelados*, see e.g., Rego (2015).



dimension of this critique, centring on Cabral's long physical absence from the islands and the resulting claim that his project was fundamentally Guinean rather than Cabo Verdean in orientation, gave it a surface plausibility that purely ideological attacks could not sustain alone. In this view, Cabral bears moral responsibility for the abuses of power committed during the post-independence period: "for some social sectors (including some sections of the archipelago intelligentsia), Cabral represents everything wrong that happened in the post-colonial period", with commentators drawing "a direct causal relationship between Cabral and the evils and political errors committed by the single-party regime" (Amado, 2012). This position draws on a broad range of arguments: his supposed lack of theoretical originality; claims that his biographical trajectory was largely alien to Cabo Verde; allegations of a dictatorial disposition; and the assertion that the prominent place he occupies in the popular imagination is unwarranted. Read in context, the "fraud" representation is not only a reaction to Cabral himself but to the specific uses to which his image was put by the single-party state. The anger directed at Cabral is in significant measure displaced anger at the PAIGC's post-independence record. Acknowledging this does not rehabilitate the anti-Cabralist critique, but it does make it historically intelligible. The second representation, the "icon", circulates widely in Cabo Verde and the diaspora through stylized reproductions of Cabral's image and his most emblematic phrases on clothing, in public space, and on social media, a mediated figure that, for Amado (2012), forecloses critical engagement with his ideas and transforms him into an idolized symbol divorced from his actual thought. The third, the "theorist-ideologue", is the least known but in Amado's view the most important: a substantial, internationally recognised body of theoretical work whose ideas remain underexplored in the Cabo Verdean academic context.

Most recently, on Cabral's centenary on 12 September 2024, anti-Cabralist criticism sharpened notably: the leadership of the MpD parliamentary group resigned collectively to protest their own party government's decision to support the issuance of a commemorative stamp marking the centenary (Santos, 2024). Such controversies confirm that Cabral remains an uncomfortable figure in some quarters, somewhat countercyclical to his consensual international celebration. Yet the anti-Cabralist tendency present in parts of the MpD and Cabo Verdean society is not dominant, as the following section demonstrates.

Cabral Today: Revolutionary Icon

Contestation and partial erasure notwithstanding, Cabral's figure has shown remarkable resilience. In Cabo Verde, the independent nation took symbolic shape around what might be described as a spectral body: absent, because his remains lie buried in Guinea-Bissau; present, because the archipelago owes its independence to the historical process he set in motion. The result is a paradoxical national hero – Cabo Verdean by parentage and adolescent schooling, Bissau-Guinean by birth and by the armed struggle he led, and holder, in formal terms, of no nationality other than that of colonial Portugal.

In Guinea-Bissau, in recent decades, the memory of the successful war of liberation and its leader has served as a redemptive reference, sustaining hope for a more just future. Following the implementation of a structural adjustment programme in 1987, the first multiparty elections in 1994 (won by Nino Vieira, in power since 1980), and the devastating



civil war of 1998–99, a lack of opportunity and widespread social dissatisfaction intensified across the country. Cabral's figure became a significant reference point, mobilized especially by the civic youth movements that emerged in the 1990s and consolidated in the 2000s in Guinea-Bissau and Cabo Verde alike (Barros and Lima, 2012, 2021). Barros and Lima (2021, p. 90) describe the recovery of the liberation struggle's legacy as "a new expression of African awakening". Kohl and Schroven (2014, p. 16) similarly note that, for a significant part of the Bissau-Guinean population, Cabral is now regarded as a martyr, embodying qualities associated with those of a prophet.

This movement finds expression in music, particularly rap and hip-hop, where Cabral is invoked as a "messenger of truth", summoned as an embodiment of pride and a figure of critique directed at political powers accused of ignoring his teachings (Barros and Lima, 2012, pp. 99–101). Barros et al. (2024, p. 51) describe these practices as collective dynamics of *artivism*, functioning "as an alternative mechanism of opposition to political power, but also as a way of revendicating and disputing the structuring memories of Guinean and Cabo Verdean identities". Since 2020, murals on the main streets of Bissau have paid tribute to Cabral and several of the PAIGC's most prominent fighters who died during or shortly after the liberation struggle (Rodrigues, 2023). Figures such as Titina Silá, Pansau Na Isna, Domingos Ramos, Francisco Mendes (Tchico Té), and José Carlos Schwarz are recognized as national heroes in a contemporary appropriation of the liberation struggle's legacy.⁶

Periodic debates arise over to whom Amílcar Cabral "belongs" and who represents the greatest figure of the Bissau-Guinean nation. These surface with intensity at specific political or symbolic moments, such as in November 2020, when Nino Vieira's remains were transferred with state honours from the municipal cemetery in Bissau to the Amura Fortress. The ceremony, presided over by Head of State Umaro Sissoco Embaló, was marked by public controversy (Martins, 2020). Embaló described Vieira as "a courageous, patriotic, and committed fighter, a statesman, a charismatic leader, who gave his life for our country and shaped our history, both during the armed struggle and as President of the Republic" (Cassamá, 2020). Days earlier, Sissoco Embaló had enacted a government decree posthumously awarding Vieira the title of "Hero of the Armed Struggle for National Liberation". The creation of the "Nino *ka muri*" movement, recalling the well-known expression "Cabral *ka muri*" (Cabral did not die) and active since at least 2017, similarly draws a deliberate equivalence between the two figures. The gesture is revealing precisely because it cannot fully succeed. The attempt to elevate Nino Vieira to a status comparable to Cabral's requires borrowing the memorial language that Cabral's own legacy generated, which already signals the asymmetry it tries to overcome. Nino Vieira governed, and governance leaves a record. Cabral did not, and his martyrdom protects him from precisely the kind of accountability that shadows Vieira's legacy. The political disputes that arise in Guinea-Bissau do not, however, challenge Cabral's legacy or the prominent place he occupies among community associations and youth sectors that aspire to social justice, transformation, and local development. His broad consensus is not despite Guinea-Bissau's contested political history but, in a specific sense, because of it.

⁶ Barros and Lima (2021, p. 94). For the case of Cabo Verde, see Cardina and Rodrigues (2022).



In Cabo Verde, renewed representations of Cabral also emerge from politicized youth sectors and diaspora-related groups. Redy Wilson Lima (2018) identifies various forms of these actions, including rap music, public petitions, cyber-activism, the resurgence of Afrocentric and Pan-Africanist cultural expressions, and community-based youth activism. This political and cultural landscape is closely connected to *Marxa Kabral*, a demonstration held annually on 20 January, the anniversary of Cabral's assassination, which serves as both a protest and an alternative political performance countering the institutionalized representations of the revolutionary. The evocation of Cabral during the *Marxa* serves not only to honour his political legacy and theoretical teachings but also as an occasion to assert "Africanity", a commitment expressed through choices of clothing, hairstyles, and music, in slogans and in the use of capoeira as a globalized symbol of Black resistance. The event also functions as a platform for challenging the dominant political order in an archipelago where youth unemployment is high and where many consider the ideals of the liberation struggle to have been betrayed by current leaders.

The 2019 edition threw these dynamics into sharp relief. On the morning of every 20 January, senior government figures, foreign representatives, and former combatants gather at the Cabral memorial for the state's official ceremony of wreath-laying and homage, and in earlier years the *Marxa* had kept its distance, march and ceremony occupying separate spaces. In 2019, the march turned, spontaneously and unannounced, toward the monument while the official ceremony was underway; police lines immediately blocked the demonstrators' approach, splitting the space between what participants called the "ceremony of power" and the "demonstration of the youth". Condensed in the episode were the *Marxa*'s defining gestures: the claim to be Cabral's legitimate heirs against those who govern in his name; the crossing of the invisible lines that separate the capital's spaces of power from its popular neighbourhoods; and the insistent chant of *Cabral ka mori* (Cabral did not die), at once memorial affirmation and political critique. Capinero (Adérito Gonçalves Tavares), activist and former president of the *Pilorinhu* association, a driving force behind the *Marxa* since 2013, recalled: "as we climbed to the Plateau, we didn't take half the road; we took the whole road" (interview to the authors, Praia, 20 May 2019).

Cutting across both countries, and increasingly beyond them, the diaspora has emerged as a distinct and significant memorial actor. The Luxembourg petition and the cyber-activism Redy W. Lima identifies among diaspora youth, all point to the same phenomenon: the diaspora does not merely transmit or preserve Cabral's legacy but actively reframes it, often with a freedom from local political constraint that is harder to sustain within the archipelago itself. This dynamic is inseparable from Cabo Verde's own liminal position relative to Africa: a country whose relationship to African identity has been historically contested, whose population abroad has long outnumbered those at home, and whose political culture is shaped as much by European frameworks as by pan-Africanist solidarities. For diaspora actors, Cabral functions as an anchor of African belonging and anticolonial commitment, a figure through whom Cabo Verdean identity can be asserted as unambiguously African, antiracist, and resistant, in contexts such as Lisbon, Luxembourg, and Rotterdam, where those assertions carry their own political charge. The memorial field around Cabral is thus not contained within national borders but is genuinely transnational, shaped by migrations, political conjunctures, and antiracist movements that



connect the archipelago to Portugal, West Africa, Brazil, and beyond (Batalha and Carling, 2008; Lima and Robalo, 2023).

In 2024, the centenary of Cabral's birth was celebrated worldwide. In Guinea-Bissau and Cabo Verde, academic and associative institutions organized a significant colloquium to mark the occasion, with sessions held simultaneously in person and virtually across both countries. Shortly afterwards, the first *Marxa Cabral* took place in Lisbon, an initiative of the Black movement in Portugal, bringing together several collectives and hundreds of participants to protest fascism, racism, and xenophobia (*Público*, 2024, p. 11). For those who marched, many of them descendants of Cabo Verdean and Guinean migrants, with no direct experience of the liberation struggle, Cabral functioned less as a historical figure than as a living political language through which claims against colonial continuities could be publicly articulated. That a demonstration invoking his name took place in the former colonial metropole was, in this sense, less a departure than a return: a reminder that Cabral's politics were always forged in the intersections between Africa, Europe, and the Atlantic world that his own life traced. The following year, on 13 September 2025, a second *Marxa Cabral* again filled the Avenida da Liberdade, this time marking the fiftieth anniversary of the independences. Its organisers marched, in their own words, "inspired by the vast and rich legacy of Amílcar Cabral's anticolonial thought and practice of struggle" under the motto "Di Povu pa Povu: Liberdade, Dignidade, Soberania Popular" (From the People to the People: Liberation, Dignity, Popular Sovereignty), denouncing in the same gesture Umaro Sissoco Embaló's dictatorship in Guinea-Bissau, state violence in Angola, racism in Portugal, and the way the Cabo Verdean state had treated Cabral's figure – "Cabral belongs to the people and to the world" (Segunda Grandi Marxa Cabral, 2025). That the marchers claimed Cabral against the very states founded in his name measures how fully his memory now circulates as a living popular language rather than an official inheritance.

Conclusion

This study opened with *Nha Fala*, and it is fitting to close with it. Gomes uses the bust of Cabral as a recurring comic device: institutions and individuals reject it, exposing how elites have appropriated his image for personal gain, yet as the film advances, the bust grows. Arenas (2011, pp. 128–129) reads this growth as a "return of the repressed", the haunting persistence of Cabral's legacy in societies grappling with present challenges. Sabine (2019) sees the film asking how Cabral's revolutionary path might be revived in a postcolonial nation undermined by deregulation, corruption, and clientelism. For both, the closing scenes stage Gomes's vision of cyclical rebirth and the enduring relevance of Cabral's ideals for future generations in Guinea-Bissau, Cabo Verde, and beyond (Arenas, 2011, p. 129; Sabine, 2019, pp. 161–162). The film's allegory points toward something the comparative analysis in this article has sought to make analytically precise. Cabral shares with other anticolonial founding figures – Nyerere, Sankara, Lumumba – the capacity to be selectively appropriated, mythologised, and detached from the constraints of historical context. What this article has argued, however, is that Cabral's case combines several features that, taken together, answer the two questions that organised the analysis.



The first question asked why memorialisation took broadly consensual and dispersed form in Guinea-Bissau and openly partisan form in Cabo Verde. The divergence is not primarily a matter of different popular attachments to Cabral. It is an effect of the interaction between his specific memorial conditions and the distinct political trajectories each state followed after the 1980 rupture. In Guinea-Bissau, the coup paradoxically preserved broad consensus: by detaching Cabral's memory from the Cabo Verdean leadership while claiming to act in his name, the coup's architects regrounded his legacy in the liberation struggle itself. In Cabo Verde, the democratic transition of 1991 inserted his memory into competitive multiparty politics, transforming it into a resource that different actors had actively to contest, defend, or appropriate. The divergence is, in this sense, institutional as much as ideological.

This divergence is visible in recent developments that confirm rather than complicate the argument. In Guinea-Bissau, Cabral remained widely recognised across political divides as a founding hero whose memory no actor could openly repudiate, yet the regime of Umaro Sissoco Embaló has been accused of progressively downplaying his legacy, an accusation that became particularly visible during the centenary commemorations of 2024, when sectors of civil society and former combatants denounced the absence of official initiatives commensurate with the historical importance of the revolutionary leader. The charge is itself revealing: even in a context of growing authoritarian consolidation, critics reach for Cabral's memory as the standard against which the present government falls short. In Cabo Verde, the divergence takes a different form: the 'decabralisation' process of the 1990s, the anti-Cabralism of sectors of the political right, and the counter-mobilisations by veterans' associations, foundations, and youth movements have made Cabral simultaneously a national symbol and a marker of partisan and ideological divides, present in Cabo Verdean public life not in a consensual but in a specifically contested register.

The second question asked what this divergence reveals about the conditions, both domestic and international, under which postcolonial states secure political-symbolic legitimacy. Three features of Cabral's case illuminate this question in combination. The first is the conjuncture of political sacrifice and bi-nationality. Unlike Nyerere or Nkrumah, who governed and therefore accrued the liabilities of actual power, Cabral was assassinated before independence and before the fracture of the binational project he had built. This double rupture produced not one memorial context but two structurally divergent ones and, in doing so, revealed a more general mechanism: symbolic capital accumulates most durably around figures removed from the compromises of governance. Because Cabral never held power, the moral authority of the liberation struggle, condensed in his figure, remained available to competing actors across decades without being tested against a record. The absence of a single custodian, produced by the binational fracture, multiplied rather than diminished his memorial force: no party, state, or generation could monopolise his legacy, which is why it continued to circulate across such a wide range of political and social registers. That the same figure could generate such different memorial politics in two states emerging from the same liberation project is, moreover, analytically instructive in ways that the existing comparative literature on African political memory, focused as it largely is on single national cases, had almost no occasion to examine.

The second feature – the range and depth of vernacular appropriation documented in Cabo Verde – reveals a further condition of postcolonial symbolic legitimacy. The millenarian



testimonies, the *rabelados'* sacred incorporation of his figure, and the Christian Rationalist "astral president" in Mindelo represent a form of memorial agency that bypasses the state entirely, drawing on Cabral's constitutive absence from the archipelago to generate mythological elaborations that official commemoration neither authorised nor controlled. These appropriations show that the most resilient and often the most transformative dimensions of a founding figure's legacy reside in registers that formal political culture neither controls nor fully comprehend. Whether comparable elaborations exist elsewhere remains underexplored; this dimension of Cabral's memorialisation is rooted in specific biographical and geographical conditions that cannot be reduced to the general mechanisms of founding-figure mythification.

The third feature – the transnational dimension – reveals that political-symbolic legitimacy is never a purely domestic achievement. Each reconfiguration of his memory tracked a political rupture that exceeded national borders. Mnemonic change and political change moved together, and both were shaped by the international conjunctures (Cold War alignments, structural adjustment, post-1989 democratisation, the global antiracist mobilisations of the present decade) within which these two small states have had to operate. Cabral's legacy has always circulated beyond the two states that claim him: forged partly through internationalist networks, it has been reactivated by diaspora communities, by the Black movement in Portugal, and by Pan-Africanist actors for whom his figure anchors a claim to African belonging. The authority of a founding figure, this suggests, is never exhausted by the domestic institutions that claim to manage it: it escapes into diasporic and transnational circuits where it acquires new political content and new constituencies.

As this study has argued, in Guinea-Bissau, Cabo Verde, and Portugal, Cabral continues to function as a living political reference through which significant segments of youth and society articulate claims for social justice, democratic accountability, and alternative futures. His enduring force is inseparable from the specific conditions that produced it: a martyrdom that arrived before the compromises of power, a binational project that fractured and left his legacy without a single custodian, and an absence that proved in many respects more generative than presence might have been.

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