

10 Western representations of the liberation struggle in Guinea-Bissau

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Introduction

Guinea-Bissau is today most commonly associated with unflattering epithets and widely derided as a “failed state”. Since the late 1970s, the country’s reputation progressively and then definitively became one of political and economic instability. “There is little remarkable about the country ... except its indebtedness”, the *Economist* could write in the 1990s.¹ Marked by a succession of *coups d’état* and a short but shattering civil war between 1998 and 1999, the country’s external image has been one of “a feast of corruption and repressive misrule”.² In the new century, “failed state” was joined by “narco-state” as common descriptors for a country now firmly associated with the illicit drug trade, the only doubt being whether it was “Africa’s first narco-state”, as the *Independent* put it,³ or “the world’s first narco state”, according to the *Guardian*.⁴ Little control or monitoring of the country’s 350 km of coastline (fragmented into 82 islands), together with corruption of police and other officials, turned Guinea-Bissau into “an easy mark for the world’s drug cartels”, according to the *LA Times*.⁵ This representation, regularly reproduced in media and scholarly accounts of the country, obscures memories of a much more positive image enjoyed by Guinea-Bissau as the country emerged from a notable national liberation struggle against Portuguese colonialism, in the 1970s.

The Portuguese colonial encounter with Africa dates to 1446, although effective control of the Guinean territory only followed the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885. The territory now corresponding to Guinea-Bissau was amongst the first to be integrated into the newly founded economic, social, and political system of the Portuguese colonial order and amongst the last to free itself from these colonial shackles.⁶ At the vanguard of the national liberation struggle was the PAIGC,⁷ founded in 1956 by Amílcar Cabral, Luís Cabral, Aristides Pereira, Fernando Fortes, Eliseu Turpin, and Júlio de Almeida, fighting for the independence of both colonies, Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, with the aim of creating a unified independent state. That struggle garnered significant international attention, with the PAIGC and Guinea-Bissau the prominent focus of international attention, widely celebrated as an exemplary case of an anti-colonial movement. More than other Portuguese colonies fighting for independence from colonial rule, Guinea-Bissau appeared to represent the epitome of a “textbook” armed decolonisation.

With the close of the anti-colonial war and Guinea-Bissau's establishment as an independent state, the country continued to attract praise. Western observers celebrated the commitment to social welfare and the development of democratic political institutions in liberated territories, auspicious signs of a post-colonial horizon – and an example for other newly emerging states. Yet this image of the country has all but vanished in today's dominant narrative of political instability and insecurity. This chapter seeks to rescue this history of the armed struggle and the embryonic construction of the Guinean nation as it was memorialised by its Western contemporaries. Drawing from scholarly work, media reports, international organisations' declarations, government statements, and personal narratives, the chapter recovers these lost memories of Guinea-Bissau's liberation trajectory in the Western imaginary. Such memories, of course, were not limited to the West – Guinea-Bissau was celebrated also by contemporaries in the Soviet bloc and the Third World, and the UN reports cited below reflect those broader shared attitudes. The concern of the chapter, however, is primarily with Western commentary, if only because here the juxtaposition with today's image of the country is most stark. The chapter focuses on three themes central to the country's external image of success: an impressive struggle against the Portuguese colonial empire; the liberation movement's exceptional leadership and organisation; and the promising experience of a proto-state in liberated areas under PAIGC control.

An unexpectedly successful armed struggle

Rarely discussed in the West and, when mentioned, dismissed as a “small swampy West African enclave”⁸ and a “miserable territory”,⁹ Guinea-Bissau – then known as Portuguese Guinea – first rose to prominence with the start of a liberation war against colonial rule. As the PAIGC's strategy for independence took off, it quickly became an inspiration for anti-colonial movements and states, solidarity groups, academics, and journalists – all eager to support and report on the cause of defeating Europe's last colonial power. Amílcar Cabral, the movement's founder, leader, and revolutionary theorist caught the world's interest and was soon celebrated as one of Africa's greatest thinkers and guerrilla strategists. Guinea-Bissau, much earlier than other sites of anti-Portuguese struggle such as Angola and Mozambique, was heralded as an extraordinary example for others in the southern African anti-colonial movement – such as those in Namibia, Zimbabwe and South Africa.¹⁰

That Guinea-Bissau became the exemplar of important transformations in the history of decolonisation could not but come as a surprise. The idea of a viable and successful armed struggle emerging from “the smallest and most backward of the Portuguese colonies”¹¹ was, as late as the early 1960s, difficult to entertain. After a few unsuccessful attempts to organise workers in Bissau against the colonial regime, the PAIGC transferred its headquarters to Conakry, in neighbouring Guinea, in 1960, to prepare for armed struggle. From 1960 to 1963, Amílcar Cabral worked to convince his countrymen of the seriousness and feasibility of the movement's strategy of peasant mass mobilisation. When the war began, in 1963, the movement

thus appeared to external observers surprisingly well prepared, united, and skilful. In stark contrast to the territory's earlier external image, the party's organisation "within this disinherited wilderness" rapidly gained a reputation as "impressive".¹² Even those hostile towards the revolution, such as John Biggs-Davidson, a British MP from the Conservative Party, recognised that the guerrilla war in Portuguese Guinea was "perhaps the most vital because of the effects of its outcome on Portuguese resistance elsewhere, and the consequences for Rhodesia and South Africa of a Portuguese collapse".¹³

The unexpected success of Amílcar Cabral's PAIGC soon exerted a fascination over those cheering for the defeat of the Portuguese and other remnants of colonialism in Africa. "The small triangle of former Portuguese territory in West Africa [...] sandwiched between Senegal and Guinea-Conakry [...] is the scene of the most advanced political and military struggle against Portuguese colonialism in Africa", explained Richard Lobban, in a special issue of US-based magazine *Africa Today*, dedicated to the liberation struggles against Portugal's colonial yoke.¹⁴ Odd Arne Westad, a Norwegian *cooperante* in Mozambique confirms: "I became interested in the decolonisation of Portuguese Africa in the early 1970s" when "Mozambique was struggling: Frelimo was less prepared than the PAIGC ... in fact, Guinea-Bissau was the success story".¹⁵

Journalists also rushed to cover the liberation war and meet the reputed leader. The academic community too was impressed by developments in Guinea-Bissau and wrote profusely throughout the late 1960s and 1970s on the reasons for the movement's successes. Numerous books and articles on the liberation struggle revealed admiration for the PAIGC and optimism for the possibilities the movement was opening in the war against colonialism.¹⁶ The country's struggle against colonialism even featured in Chris Marker's documentary *Sans Soleil*. Guinea-Bissau would never again be in the international spotlight – and benefit from such favourable accounts – as during these early years.

An impressive liberation leader

The major reason for this enthusiasm was undoubtedly Amílcar Cabral, "PAIGC's most important asset".¹⁷ Academics devoted pages to his striking personality and achievements, many writing in glowing terms about Cabral's political thought.¹⁸ Those who met him, such as the Swedish academic Lars Rudebeck, speak of being impressed by his "quiet charisma, his capacity to combine in an unusual way intellectual sharpness and emotional strength".¹⁹ In fact, long after they had ceased to celebrate Guinea-Bissau as an example of a successful revolutionary movement, many scholars continued to dedicate pages to Cabral and his thought.²⁰ The Western press also wrote admiringly of Cabral, presenting him as "Africa's most distinguished guerrilla leader".²¹ Even more conservative journalists conceded he was a "businesslike, Westernised" leader, assuring readers that, notwithstanding the use of "communist weapons and communist theories of revolutionary warfare", he was "clearly not a communist".²² Publications also praised Cabral's fairness, ordering his forces to avoid killing civilians of any race, turning over Portuguese prisoners

of war to the Red Cross, and exhibiting a seemingly endless willingness to negotiate, with Lisbon, an end to the war and the country's self-determination.²³ Amílcar Cabral was the main responsible for and the central recipient of internal and external optimism and high expectations. Indeed, Cabral's influence at this juncture was central to internationalising the cause of the defeat of Portuguese colonialism and bringing recognition to the PAIGC's struggle.

A promising proto-state

Western discourse at this time did not focus only on the armed struggle. Another pillar of the PAIGC's success, in the eyes of both internal and external observers, was the construction of a new society ostensibly free from exploitation and oppression. Amílcar Cabral and the PAIGC offered sympathisers evidence of a "consciously applied strategy" to "challenge ... the social, political, and economic *status quo* of underdevelopment".²⁴

The powerful revolutionary elite, formed and strengthened by the armed conflict, gained increasing influence over the course of the struggle, and began to establish a prototype of "people's power" in the areas freed from Portuguese control. These so-called "liberated areas" – which the movement claimed covered two-thirds of the country and fifty per cent of the population by the early 1970s were to become the basis for a new independent state. These were social experiments in a new African socialist ideology (although the movement's gradual alignment with a Marxist-Leninist line was discussed only *sotto voce* so as not to alienate potential Western sponsors). According to Carlos Lopes, "[t]he embryo of institutional power was decisively created in the liberated areas of Guinea Bissau".²⁵ Strong organisational measures, envisaging a profound cultural transformation, were designed and implemented. These concerned the idea of *people's power*: village committees, people's courts, people's stores, agricultural production, women's empowerment, and educational and health projects offered successful examples of the PAIGC's capacity to govern. Lars Rudebeck, visiting in November and December of 1970, noted the movement's success in transforming itself into a *de facto* state in the liberated areas:

the days when the PAIGC was just a rebel movement had thus passed long ago. It is easy to confirm this opinion after having spent some time in the liberated areas of the country. There can be no doubt that the PAIGC today is a revolutionary movement building a new society with broad popular support, and a small but well-organised people's army.²⁶

From 2 to 8 April 1972, the UN sent a Special Mission, composed of observers from various member states, to visit the liberated areas in Guinea-Bissau. The Mission, able to confirm the party's reported achievements, proved a major diplomatic success for the liberation movement. Its report praised the PAIGC's efforts in health and education, conveying the party's achievements in the liberated territories which, by 1972, included the establishment of 200 medical clinics; the

enrolment of 20,000 children, taught by a staff of 251 teachers, in around 200 primary schools; the enrolment of 495 people in high school and universities in allied countries; and the training of 497 high and middle-level civil servants.²⁷ The contrast with Portuguese colonial legacy was striking: under the colonial regime there were no doctors outside the main cities, over 90 per cent of the population was illiterate, the first and only high school had been built in the 1950s and, as Basil Davidson reports, in the 1960s, under the colonial regime, only fourteen Guineans had had access to university.²⁸

The Mission “was impressed by the enthusiastic and wholehearted cooperation which PAIGC receives from the people in the liberated areas and the extent to which the latter are participating in the administrative machinery set up by PAIGC and of the various programs of reconstruction”.²⁹ Based on the Mission’s report, the UN’s Special Committee on Decolonisation adopted a resolution on 13 April 1972 claiming a success of its own, expressing “its conviction that the successful accomplishment by the Special Mission of its task – establishing beyond any doubt the fact that *de facto* control in these areas is exercised by the PAIGC, the national liberation movement of the territory – constitutes a major contribution by the United Nations in the field of decolonization”.³⁰

Later that year, the UN General Assembly, on its 27th session, appealed “to the governments and the peoples of the world to hold annually a Week of Solidarity with the Colonial Peoples of Southern Africa and Guinea (Bissau) and Cape Verde Fighting for Freedom, Independence and Equal Rights” and proposed that “the Week should begin on 25 May, Africa Liberation Day”.³¹ Shortly after, the General Assembly and the Security Council reaffirmed the right of Portuguese Guinea’s people to self-determination and independence in General Assembly Resolution 2918(XXVII) of 14 November 1972³² and Security Council Resolution 322(1972) of 22 November 1972.³³ Moreover, as proposed by the Special Committee on Decolonisation, the Fourth Committee of the 27th UN General Assembly recognised the PAIGC as “the only and authentic representative of the people of the territory”, reviewing very favourably the party’s achievements.³⁴

Women’s role in the liberation struggle was also a matter of international attention. Stephanie Urdang’s first-hand account drew a particularly favourable picture of PAIGC’s achievements in this area:

The involvement of women in the revolution, a goal from the very beginning, was not an afterthought (...). When the first mobilisers went into the countryside in 1959–1960, the program of political education for which they were trained by Cabral included raising the consciousness of both women and men about the oppression of women and the need to fight against it. (...) By the time I visited the country just over a decade later, men and women were attending meetings of the population in equal numbers. Half the speakers that I heard were women, who told me of their participation in the revolution and who spoke with confidence before hundreds of people.³⁵

Urdang stressed that “the PAIGC helped pave the way for increased freedom of women”.³⁶ According to the author, in order to fight against discrimination against women in education, girls’ enrolment in primary schools was considered a priority and girls were sent abroad to study at allied countries’ secondary schools. Rice

provision for the guerrilla, for the most part in the hands of women, became a political task from which women began to derive power and status. Two out of five elected village councillors, moreover, had to be women, thus including them from the inception in the grassroots political leadership; this was also visible at higher levels, for instance, of the three political workers, corresponding to the three war fronts – northern, eastern, and southern – responsible for the social reconstruction and political education program, two were women. There were women directors of schools, heads of hospitals and chief nurses, many coming from peasant families. Oppressive traditional customs such as the absence of divorce and forced marriage were reversed and the People's Courts were instructed to intervene. Polygamy was forbidden for Party members, in the hope of slowly changing this ingrained custom. If not blind to continuing inequalities – more notably the absence of women in combat roles – Urdang confidently concludes that Guinean women appeared well positioned to continue their second fight after independence: the one for equality.³⁷

A further source of praise was the PAIGC's apparent commitment to democratic principles. In 1972, in the midst of guerrilla warfare, the PAIGC managed to organise elections in the liberated areas for regional councils that would later elect representatives for the People's National Assembly – again, in stark contrast with the areas under Portuguese control at this time, where no elections were held: Bissau, Bolama, Bijagós Islands, and Bafatá. The PAIGC elections were reported as “steps toward democracy” and considered “impressive” by the *Economist*.³⁸

PAIGC leaders held the conviction that the development of these democratic political institutions would enable the political participation of villagers – some 52,000 voters in the 1973 elections – and establish connections with the highest level party officials, thus allowing ordinary citizens to participate in decision-making processes while also conferring legitimacy on the PAIGC.³⁹ Writing in the *New York Times*, one journalist applauded this “measure of the guerrilla's success in bringing democracy to Guinea-Bissau”.⁴⁰

Welcoming Guinea-Bissau into the world community

These developments all won the PAIGC leadership significant sympathy in Western countries. The *New York Times* labelled it “the most successful of the African movements attempting to end Portugal's rule”.⁴¹ Yet, the positive exposure Guinea-Bissau enjoyed throughout the struggle was the product of earnest diplomatic manoeuvring.⁴² The PAIGC was clear about the need to garner external support and invested in its foreign relations from its inception. On the basis of the historic UN General Assembly Resolution 1514 (XV) of 14 December 1960, *Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and People*,⁴³ Amílcar Cabral sent regular information to the UN about the struggle and received encouraging feedback from the organisation. In 1971, Guinea-Bissau, represented by the PAIGC, became an associate member of the UN Economic Commission for Africa.⁴⁴ Portugal was, at this time, repeatedly condemned within the world organisation. With the Western bloc abstaining, even the Security Council approved resolutions against Portugal, affirming to be “*deeply disturbed* at the reported use of chemical substances by Portugal in its colonial wars against the peoples of Angola

Mozambique and Guinea (Bissau)” and “recognising the legitimacy of the struggle ... in their demand for the achievement of self-determination and independence”.⁴⁵

Besides cooperation from Guinea-Conakry and Senegal, the movement also received military and technical assistance, primarily from the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, China and Cuba.⁴⁶ It also rapidly added financial assistance from anti-colonial countries and movements, such as Sweden or France,⁴⁷ as well as private organisations such as the World Council of Churches, and UN agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organisation (UNESCO).⁴⁸

As PAIGC’s external capital grew, Portugal’s rapidly diminished. When Cabral was assassinated, contrasting attitudes towards the two sides in the war were patent in Western coverage. Douglas Pike, writing in the *New York Times*, announced: “[t]he night of Jan. 20, 1973, Amílcar Cabral’s death became the final sacrifice to the cause for which he had dedicated his life. (...) In Portuguese Guinea ... Lisbon clings to an African colony fighting for independence, aided and abetted by the freedom-loving Atlantic Alliance”.⁴⁹ The *Economist* was similarly glowing in its praise of Cabral and the PAIGC: “Mr Cabral’s achievement was to make the PAIGC into a force which fought with schools, clinics and ballot boxes as well as with weapons, and which can sustain its momentum even without his leadership”.⁵⁰

Emboldened by criticism of Portuguese colonial policy, the PAIGC grew robust enough to overcome the tragic assassination of its acclaimed leader and actually intensified the anti-colonial war, mostly by making use of Soviet anti-air rockets, against, at that point, 35,000 Portuguese troops. Only a few months after this setback, and purposefully coinciding with the General Assembly’s annual meeting, the PAIGC held a People’s National Assembly session in the liberated region of Medina de Boé. The Assembly, with 120 deputies, unilaterally declared independence of the “Republic of Guinea-Bissau” on September 24, 1973, noting “the *de facto* existence of an efficiently functioning State structure”.⁵¹ Amílcar’s half-brother, Luís Cabral, was formally elected President of the State Council. “On 24 September 1973 history was made in Africa”, Lobban stresses; “[t]he first sub-Saharan African nation unilaterally declared its sovereignty from European colonialism following a protracted armed struggle” – “[t]he implications of this move are immense”, he concludes.⁵² The declaration was attended by foreign reporters from Sweden, the Soviet Union, Eastern Germany, and China.⁵³ Albeit in a rather weak-kneed reaction, even the British Mission to the UN, in a letter to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London in October, stated its position to be “that it is harmful to our interests to seem to be defending the Portuguese, especially if we do so in isolation or comparative isolation”, fearing hostility on the part of independent African states.⁵⁴

Independence, if not yet recognised by Portugal, affirmed the country’s glowing reputation amongst Western counterparts. The period following the announcement was, effectively, the country’s *honeymoon period* in its relations with the outside world. The warm welcome extended to Guinea-Bissau by the international community of states was shaped, in important ways, by the country’s external representation.

A series of diplomatic achievements rapidly followed the unilateral declaration of independence in September 1973, as Guinea-Bissau was placed squarely on the agenda of various Western states and organisations. Less than a month later, the new state had been officially recognised by 54 countries.⁵⁵ In his speech to the 1973 UN General Assembly, General Gowon, then President of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), appealed to all “friends of Africa” to accommodate the new nation’s “rightful position as a proud member of the international community”.⁵⁶ In November 20, 1973, the PAIGC was officially admitted to the OAU as a full member,⁵⁷ and Luís Cabral later elected deputy chairman.⁵⁸ On 3 December 1973, Guinea-Bissau participated in the third UN Law of the Sea Conference, despite Portuguese protests.⁵⁹

By the end of the year, with the colonial regime still blocking Guinea-Bissau’s full independence, the 28th UN General Assembly adopted a Resolution welcoming Guinea-Bissau’s accession to independence, and condemned Portugal for “perpetuating its illegal occupation of certain sectors of the Republic of Guinea-Bissau and the repeated acts of aggression committed by its armed forces against the people of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde”,⁶⁰ notwithstanding objection once more from Portugal, but also the US and Britain, amongst others.⁶¹ In March 1974, Guinea-Bissau was granted observer status at the UN and was admitted with full voting rights to the International Conference on Rules of War in Geneva – in contrast with other liberation movements which were granted only observer status.⁶² Besides political recognition, the PAIGC was also proving capable of capturing financial and material support: in April the OAU announced the establishment of a US\$ 450,000 fund for the territory under the PAIGC’s control and Libya pledged an additional US\$ 500,000,⁶³ following the FAO’s earlier recognition of the Republic of Guinea-Bissau, the World Food Program made food aid available to peoples in liberated areas in African colonial territories, acknowledging the decision had been made with Guinea-Bissau, as well as Angola and Mozambique, in mind.⁶⁴

Criticism of Portugal’s African wars, and demands for the colonial power to concede defeat and start political negotiations, were accompanied by popular support for the PAIGC’s liberation struggle in various Western countries and concomitant pressure on domestic parliaments to recognise Guinea-Bissau.⁶⁵ Important personalities in the United States, for instance, made passionate pleas for the recognition of the country’s independence, making parallels with French and North American revolutionary history. The African Studies Association, bringing together institutions and individuals with a scholarly interest in Africa, called on the United States to recognise the new country.⁶⁶ Charles Diggs Jr, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Africa, of the US House of Representatives’ Committee on Foreign Affairs, also publicly called on his government to recognise the state of Guinea-Bissau. “Let us not”, the Congressman plead, “on the eve of our Bicentennial, turn our back on the words of Jefferson in 1792 in reference to the revolution in France: ‘It accords with our principles to acknowledge any government to be rightful which is formed by the will of the nation, substantially declared’”.⁶⁷ George Houser, executive director of the American Committee on Africa, a private organisation which supported African independence, also wrote an enthusiastic article for the *New York Times*

calling on the United States to recognise the liberation movement's declaration of independence, going so far as to compare it with that of the US in 1776.⁶⁸ The recognition of Guinea-Bissau's independence by the United States was problematic, given the superpower's use of Portugal's Azores military base in the 1973 Yom Kippur war, in exchange for which Lisbon had demanded political and military support for its colonial policies and wars.⁶⁹ Britain continued to ambiguously move between opposition to Guinea-Bissau's aspirations of recognition and attempting, in the background, to mediate between the PAIGC and Portugal in order to safeguard its own relations with sub-Saharan Africa.⁷⁰ Western powers were careful not to publicly confront their NATO ally, yet while Portugal and the PAIGC were still holding negotiations for the transfer of power,⁷¹ the UN Security Council unanimously recommended that Guinea-Bissau be admitted to the UN.⁷²

These events were an undisputable confirmation of the movement's exceptional international standing at this particular historical juncture. The international community looked upon the new Guinean state, heir to one of the most inspiring and reputed liberation movements in Africa, with confidence and optimism and appeared vested in producing results. Patrick Chabal, a clearly sympathetic academic, summarises succinctly the reasons animating this external representation and attitude of confidence in its future:

Guinea-Bissau stands as a symbol of African will against colonial might. The first African country (other than Algeria) to launch a full-scale nationalist war, the first to attain independence through guerrilla war, and the first to attempt to construct a socialist state on the basis of free and fair elections before independence, Guinea-Bissau was in the mid-seventies a beacon of hope for those concerned with the fate of socialism in Africa. Amílcar Cabral, the founder and leader of the nationalist movement (PAIGC) which had achieved so much, was, at the time of his death in 1973, probably the most highly respected nationalist leader in Africa. He was recognised as the architect of what was then and remains today the most successful people's war in Africa and was widely regarded as the most original political thinker of his generation.⁷³

By the time of the Portuguese revolution, in April 1974, the PAIGC had been recognised by 82 countries as the official government of Guinea-Bissau⁷⁴ – more countries than with which the Portuguese dictatorship enjoyed diplomatic relations. Indeed, many commentators recognised that the bloodless military coup which ousted the dictatorship and initiated the democratic transition of the former colonial power had begun with an army mutiny for which the PAIGC's military success was directly responsible.⁷⁵ Several months before any other colonies, Guinea-Bissau was finally recognised as an independent country by Portugal on 10 September 1974. The country became a UN member on 17 September, at the opening of the 29th General Assembly.

After independence, the new state continued to enjoy a positive image abroad. Eastern and Western states and movements and international institutions which had

supported the liberation rushed to help build the new country. Support flowed from the Soviet Union, Cuba, East Germany, and China, as well as Sweden, Holland, Norway, Denmark, France, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, Britain, Finland, Yugoslavia, several Arab states, the European Economic Community (EEC), the UN, and even (post-revolution) Portugal (albeit only after initially strained relations).

Luís Cabral rejected foreign military bases in the country⁷⁶ and insisted on non-alignment in order to maintain an open door to both Cold War geopolitical blocs and secure funds from multiple sources.⁷⁷ Media reports emphasised the absence of nationalisation of major industries and the return of Portuguese and Lebanese traders (many of whom had left upon initial independence).⁷⁸ The President was perceived by Western powers as avoiding the more radical Marxist stance adopted by independence movements in Angola and Mozambique: “[t]o the welcomed surprise of many Western leaders, President Luís Cabral appears to be steering this former Portuguese colony on a course of political moderation and economic pragmatism”.⁷⁹ He was depicted in the Western press as a leader who did not “speak in the political clichés familiar in ‘revolutionary’ Africa”⁸⁰ while being responsible for the establishment of jungle stores, hospitals and schools that has been described as amongst the best on the continent.⁸¹

Luís Cabral was, however, to benefit only shortly from his acclaimed predecessor’s political capital. And the same fate would befall Guinea-Bissau. If Western representations of Guinea Bissau were largely optimistic during the country’s liberation war and independence, thus producing favourable dynamics in the country’s interaction with the outside world, international attention soon began to fade as hopes for a smooth and successful transition to statehood were progressively crushed in the post-colonial period. Not only did external interest rapidly decline from the late 1970s onwards, but mainstream portrayals of the country increasingly focused on internal tensions and crises in what would become a pattern for external representations and understandings of the Guinean postcolonial context.

Conclusion

The enthusiastic and optimistic representations of Guinea-Bissau on the eve of independence from Portuguese colonial rule are in sharp contrast with the country’s image in the West today. They were also in stark juxtaposition with earlier attitudes that cast the country as a “Scotland-sized piece of swamp”.⁸² Over the course of an 11-year anti-colonial armed struggle, Guinea-Bissau’s reputation was dramatically transformed, gaining moral and political support from across the international community, and financial and military support from a significant number of both Eastern and Western states, along with solidarity groups and private organisations. The PAIGC demonstrated a remarkable capacity to govern territories liberated from the Portuguese and rose to independence and power in the midst of widespread popular support – from both domestic and international audiences. Yet years later, the same country would be regarded with suspicion by the Western community, and ultimately labelled a “failed state” and a “narco-state”.

Once celebrated as exceptional, Guinea-Bissau no longer stood out from the usual gloomy accounts of African decline into political instability and economic decadence. The country ceased to be a beacon of hope, instead now merely one more example of a supposedly disorderly and threatening periphery. Similarly, Western perceptions of the country's leadership have shifted from impressive and capable to corrupt and unstable, with a corresponding erosion of institutional and personal support.

Today, the country's profoundly negative representation has become hegemonic, Western discourse reproducing an image of seemingly unredeemable failure and contributing to collective forgetting. The erasure of the radical potential of Guinea-Bissau's national liberation movement from our historical memory contributes to the denigration of the promise it and other such movements once offered to those struggling against imperialism, thereby serving, today, the (neo)colonial interests they were born to oppose.

Notes

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- 3 Jonathan Miller, "Drug Barons Turn Bissau into Africa's First Narco-State," *The Independent*, July 18, 2007.
- 4 Ed Vulliamy, "How a Tiny West African Country Became the World's First Narco State," *The Guardian*, March 9, 2008.
- 5 Scott Kraft, "Guinea-Bissau: Cocaine's Traffic Hub," *LA Times*, November 2009.
- 6 Lars Rudebeck, *Guinea-Bissau: A Study of Political Mobilization* (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1974), 3.
- 7 Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde).
- 8 Lloyd Garrison, "Battle Widening in Lisbon Enclave," *The New York Times*, September 8, 1963.
- 9 "The War the Portuguese are Losing," *Economist*, April 27, 1968.
- 10 Patrick Chabal, "National Liberation in Portuguese Guinea, 1956-1974," *African Affairs* 80, no. 318 (1981): 75.
- 11 Chabal, "National Liberation," 79.
- 12 "The War," *The Economist*.
- 13 John Biggs-Davidson, "The Current Situation in Portuguese Guinea," *African Affairs* 70, no. 281 (1971): 385.
- 14 Richard Lobban, "Guinea-Bissau: 24 September 1973 and Beyond," *African Today* 21, no. 1 (1974): 15.
- 15 Odd Arne Westad, interview by the author, February 2011. Westad worked for Students and Teachers International Relief Fund in Mozambique between 1978 and 1979.
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