

AMILCAR CABRAL

AN AGRONOMIST BEFORE HIS TIME



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(agronomist)

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To the memory of my father Arthur who, since my childhood stimulated me, without me understanding, to follow the ways of agronomy

To my mother Clara who was always solidly behind my options and at whose hands I saw, for the first time, and still during the times of the dictatorship, the symbols of the PAIGC

To Isabel, my forever strong and engaged companion in this difficult but extraordinary walk

To my children Cristina, Ivan and Catarina who courageously and without hesitation shared with us the political upheavals of life of their parents.

To my granddaughters Sara and Clara, with the hope that one day they will be able to live in tranquility in the adjourned land as Cabral dreamt.

At 28 years of age, in September 1952, a few months after completing his studies, Amílcar Cabral the agronomist returned to the land that witnessed his birth.

In his thinking, he certainly brought the words that his father, Juvenal Cabral, wrote in the book *Memórias e Reflexões* (Memories and Reflections), when he settled in Bissau in 1911, after “having left the naked rocks of *Paria Negra*, of *Achada Grande*, of *Lazareto*, and whose severe and sad aspect, seems to symbolize the suffering and pain, my eyes, amazed, had contemplated without ceasing the paradisiacal majesty of the flora that, in a mysterious way seems to emerge from the sea! Leafy trees all over, pretty and strange shrub that, verdant, spread in the ground like carpets on the floor. All this is opulence and vigor, it is wonder that enchants, it is wealth that seduces, and predisposes a youngster to face life with optimism in this country.”

This vision of his father must have influenced Amílcar Cabral to opt to exercise his profession in Guinea, besides the fact that, at the time, agriculture in Cape Verde was proscribed to abandonment, where most of the men emigrated northward (U.S.A., Portugal and Holland) for

survival and livelihood, while others, since the end of the 19th century, sought Guinea to dedicate to farming, especially the cultivation of sugar cane, almost always associated with the production of *aguardente* (overproof rum).

An agronomist who in fact wanted to exercise his profession, would have to opt for Guinea, where everything could be made, where everything had to be made and where the almost totality of the inhabitants were small “native” farmers.

His first wife, Maria Helena Rodrigues, a sylviculturist, who joined him three months later, would for the first time know the city of Bissau, then a small urban center with very few inhabitants, spread into two distinct zones: on one side the colonial city, so-called “civilized”, that included the *Amura* fortress, the area now known as *Bissau Velho* (Old Bissau), the port of *Pindjiguiti*, and the Avenue of the Republic - today Amílcar Cabral Avenue. This avenue extended to the monument *Esforço da Raça* (Effort of the Race) and the Governor’s Palace, then under construction. The other part, surrounding the center, was the so-called “native” part, preponderantly inhabited by the *pepel* ethnic group.

It was in the colonial part that the few intellectuals present in the country lived, and were located the large foreign firms such as NOSOCO and SCOA, to which were added Portuguese trading houses (A.C. Gouveia, Alvaro Camacho and *Sociedade Comercial Ultramarina*, among others), as well as an enormous pleiade of Lebanese small traders like Mamud ElAwar, Aly Souleiman, Michel Ajouz, etc.

In the rest of the country, the trade of products and basic goods were primarily secured by *djilas*, itinerant traders who traveled all over the country by bicycle and canoe.



Amílcar and Maria Helena recently arrived in Bissau

So-called “native” agriculture, practiced for about 3,000 years, centered around the cultivation of rice for consumption within the rural communities, and in the production of the export crop, *mancarra* (peanuts/groundnuts), stimulated by the foreign companies who alternately export it to Europe (raw or oil). The *mancarra* cycle started in the zone of Buba, stimulated by Germans, and following an easy itinerary to identify through the erosion and degradation of the soil that it provoked, and which passed on to Bolama, northern Oio, Bafatá, and Gabú.

Official services of support to the farmers were practically nonexistent or inoperative, confined within the administrative and technical infrastructures built. No center of experimentation, of staff training, or of vulgarization.

This is the global context that Cabral encounters upon his arrival in Bissau; he arrives, as he said, “to live his time”, to initiate the political challenges of the struggle for the conquest of independence, to defend a development centered in agriculture and to promote the dignity of the Guinean people.

He and Maria Helena settle themselves in the house assigned to the director of the Experimental Farm of Pessubé, then situated very far from the center of Bissau, in a poor neighborhood at the periphery and in an isolated zone and of difficult access. The Farm comprises 400 hectares of land where a large number of essential forests existed and a small number of some fruit species, for example the cocoa palm.

At this time, when he starts to exercise his profession, Amílcar is convinced that the independence process will unfold peacefully, in the form it will proceed in other African countries, for which he decides to start the construction of the new *conceptual agricultural building* that would gradually substitute the existing colonial model.

The Pessubé Farm will be his point of departure, to start putting in practice a strategy, in three principal stages that he considers important for the development of Guinean agriculture:

- **the first one was to transform the Farm from a mere unit of vegetable production destined to the colonial political and administrative authorities of the *praça* [city] and a place for picnics and recreation walks, into a center of agricultural research, while a tool to improve and modernize the production of the farmers.**

Cabral conceives and applies a program of experimentation based on the identification of cultivation techniques for different types of farming (compass, land demarcation, fertilization, and sowing period), of tests for various adaptations (rice, sugar-cane, *mancarra*, banana, cotton, and horticultures), of plagues and illnesses, valorization of local varieties of certain species like “jute,” and the introduction of new species such as sesame, soy, and sunflower.

Work to take advantage of the farmlands of the *Granja* starts, using innovative criteria, in conformity with the nature of the soil and its capability, betting on its organic fertilization based on the dung of the animals of the Cattle Farm, in the consociation of cultivations (cassava-banana trees), identification of plagues and illnesses, characterization of the different varieties of each species.

He initiates, for the first time, publication of the results of experiments and reflections on Guinean agriculture, creating for this purpose the quarterly *Boletim Informativo* (Information Bulletin) of the Experimental Farm of Pessubé where, besides the description of activities, he proposed reflection on important themes such as “mechanized farming”, the “groundnut rosette virus” and the “farming of jute”.

With a notable regularity, five *Boletins Informativos* were published from November 1952.

- **the second was to tear down internal walls within which the agricultural services were confined, to approximate them to the farmers, who should be the main beneficiaries.**

More than the saying of the time that “agriculture is the base of the economy”, Cabral clearly defended that “agriculture is the real economy of Guinea” for which it was important for the services to get close to the small farmers.

It is in this way that the *Granja de Pessubé* starts to carry out tests and [gain?] agricultural experiences in the stations of Bula, Safim, Bigene, Nhacra and Prábis, making what nowadays is called “trials in peasant setting”, as a form of testing its adaptability to different ecological conditions and farming systems of the agriculturalists.

The FAO agricultural census project approved by the Portuguese government in 1947 and soon put in the drawer where it slept for more than 4 years, is quickly retaken by Cabral, few months after his arrival at Pessubé, which he studies, plans and executes. For him, the census was not only a set of tables and numbers, but also the possibility to read, comprehend and act on the prevailing agricultural dynamic.

This work allowed him to define in precise form the contribution of different Guinean ethnic groups to agricultural production, serving to this day, after 60 years, [as basis] for understanding the production systems and farming practiced by them.

In other words, the census made the agricultural services leave their ivory tower towards the fields of the farmers, confronting them with the reality that they had to serve and make possible the search for solutions to their fundamental problems and the modernization of agriculture.

- **the third was that of the interaction of Guinean farmers with those in the neighboring countries of the sub-region.**

Conscious that the reduced number of technical personnel and the constant lack of resources would hinder the realization of agricultural research that could bring useful and practical results to farmers, Cabral encouraged the coming to Pessubé of various technical entities, such as the French pedological mission of Dakar, sugar-cane specialists, entomologists, etc.

The participation of Amílcar Cabral in the “International Conference Groundnut-Millet”, realized in Bambey, Senegal, in 1954, where he presents a paper on “*Queimadas e pousios no ciclo cultural Mancarra-Milheto*” (Forest fires and fallow land in the farming cycle of Groundnut-Millet), is an eloquent proof of his strategy of knowing the results of the experiments of older foreign stations with greater numbers of technicians, and to mark the presence and capacity of Guinean technicians in the scientific circuits of the sub-region, aspects that he considered determinant for the post-independence period.



Amílcar Cabral, Maria Helena and Clara Schwarz on the road returning from Dakar to Bissau in 1954

Internally, he starts creating a nucleus of technical personnel who can guarantee the continuity and strengthening of these programs. Among them, two stand out:

Bacar Cassamá, agricultural monitor of the Farm, is the first person he gets close to, and with whom he would create relations of friendship and confidence until the end of his life. Tall,

strong, serious, with difficulty to smile, with whom he will repeatedly have quarrels, always overcome, because in his ways, the best form of being honest was to clearly tell the “engineer” his position and what he thought. A man who never bent over backwards, continued to be his friend and faithful to the PAIGC, even after the *coup d'état* of Nino Vieira, when there was an attempt to erase Cabral from the history of Guinea Bissau. He ended up dying in 2012, forgotten and abandoned by his friends, he who had followed Cabral more than anyone else.

Júlio Antão de Oliveira Almeida, practicing farmer in the Granja , ends up being present at the founding of the PAIGC in Bissau, in September of 1956, and in the subsequent activities. He dies in Portugal after independence, in 1982.

For two and a half years, Cabral travels all over Guinea from end to end, observing, studying and writing on facies of Guinean agriculture. One can cite the case of the study of forest fires and fallow lands in Fulacunda. Determinant was the realization of the agricultural census when, as head of a technical team, he contacted farmers, community leaders, young people, and women, understanding the different logics of thought and action of each ethnic group, its potentialities and weaknesses and above all its most pressing priorities in the promotion of its way of life.

In March of 1955, he leaves Bissau in an Air France plane, by order of the colonial political governmental authorities that accused him of exercising conspiratorial activities for the independence of Guinea, which effectively corresponded to the truth, but he did not allow them this right. He was authorized to visit Bissau annually, which he takes advantage of in 1956, to collaborate with other nationalists in the founding of the PAIGC, on a day in September that later ends up being arbitrarily fixed as the 19th. Also, in 1959, already with 35 years of age, he comes to Bissau in the year of the Massacre at the port of Pindjiguiti, a determinant moment for Cabral to understand that the conquest of independence would have to be obtained by armed struggle of long duration and not by peaceful form which he always strove for.

After he was expelled from Guinea, Cabral continued to develop his agronomical activity in Portugal and Angola, always dedicating himself to reflection on Guinean agriculture, distinguishing the publication in the journal AGROS of the *Associação de Estudantes de Agronomia* (Association of Students of Agronomy), of his text: “*A agricultura na Guiné, algumas notas sobre as suas características e problemas fundamentais*” (Agriculture in Guinea, some notes about its characteristics and fundamental problems).

In 1960, stimulated by the independence of Guinea-Conakry, and for the “NO” vote delivered to France in 1958, he decides to definitely establish himself in Conakry, sure that it was the ideal place, taking into consideration the way Senegal had decided to accede to independence. The

vicissitudes that the guerrilla underwent in this country during the 11 years of struggle, came to show that his vision was correct.

Few years before his assassination, in 1972, conscious that the military victory was a given fact and would appear in the short run, he starts to dedicate more of his time to the conception of the future State of Guinea-Bissau, and from there agriculture becomes present again in the future program. The stay in Conakry allows him to identify the real dangers which the new country will confront in the post independence period. One of them is the “attractions” that the city of Bissau would have among the leading cupola of the guerrillas, the tendency for intrigues and political complot and finally the resting of the guerrilla. The other was the inevitable forgetfulness and gradual distancing of the leaders with regards to the populations that had participated in the armed struggle. One of the ideas that Cabral was developing when he is assassinated was the creation of different governmental ministries, one in each of the regional capitals of the country. It would keep the leaders close to the citizens, force them to resolve the concrete problems of the people, and diminish the risk of “*diz que diz*” (he said, she said), of the sterile conflictuality and of the political intrigue of the leaders. It is the return to the agronomist thesis that the technicians and decision-makers should not lock themselves behind doors, but should be close to the beneficiaries of their work.

THE AGRONOMIST THOUGHT OF CABRAL

The first great and decisive rupture with the established concepts was made by Cabral from the beginning, when he was still formulating his thesis in the Alentejo [in southern Portugal]. At the time, he invigorated the principle that the advance of agriculture would be made exclusively through the introduction of new agricultural techniques. Later they would come to designate this option as “technological package”. Cabral, while recognizing the necessity to make use of alternative techniques, centers in man the challenge of all the agricultural evolution. It is enough to see that colonial agriculture was based exclusively on the work of specialists of the *illnesses of the coffee tree*, of the soil, etc., without agriculture being seen as a set of components where the principal actor was the farmer, active subject interested in his evolution. Cabral breaks with this vision and integrates the human element, the farmer, as the determinant element of the modernization of agriculture, enabling the introduction of new agricultural techniques as an answer to the problems felt by the farmers. During these times, a consequence of this vision, farmers were easily blamed for the failure of *non or bad utilization* of these techniques, without understanding that the crux of the problem resided in the non comprehension on the part of the technician of the real priorities of the farmers. It is curious to note that nowadays, technicians appear in Guiné-Bissau with a ridiculously opposite vision, stating that technical innovations are not necessary, needing to leave the farmers to themselves, since they [have] millennially practiced farming and already know everything.

For Cabral, the modernization of agriculture should start with knowledge of the agrarian systems and not from its compartmentalization of disciplines of agriculture, where one runs the permanent risk of having a parceled vision and action of local challenges. Cabral, already at this time, espoused the thesis that one should simultaneously have a global concept of the challenges of agriculture and a realistic sense of promptly intervening with practical answers to the necessities of the farmers. In other words, it was these that should determine the agricultural agenda of the research and vulgarization and not the strategies of the colonial metropolis to determine *mancarra/peanut*, cotton, coffee, cacao, etc., as the species to develop in the different colonies.

Cabral was the first to question the system of agriculture based on the monoculture, at the time *mancarra*, which represented a danger for the economy with the annual price fluctuations in the external markets that put the farmer in a situation of dependence, risk and uncertainty. Also, the monoculture subjected him to the possibility of not having any financial alternative to meet his food needs in a bad agricultural year. Furthermore, in the case of *mancarra*, it provoked an irreversible degradation of soil, especially through its erosion. This alert was not only unheard at the time, but it was also not understood during the post-independence period where, today, Guinea-Bissau lives the drama of the cashew farmer. For Cabral, it was necessary “to diversify production to not depend only on a product”.

The importance of implanting a “system of research-vulgarization” was assumed from the beginning of his activities as an agronomist. The transformation of the status of the *Granja de Pessubé* into a center of agricultural experimentation, as well as the creation of a network of dispersed posts in the country for the realization of trials of varietal adaptation, proves the importance of the dynamic “experimentation-dissemination” in the modernization of Guinean agriculture. It was in this form that the first results of the realized trials soon became disseminated and used.

The dangers and limits of agricultural mechanization (Cabral refers only to motorization, not including animal traction) are exhaustingly addressed in a 1953 text, since he is confronted immediately upon his arrival in Bissau with a thesis very much in vogue that attributed the non use of farm tractors to the backwardness of Guinean agriculture.

He calls attention to various aspects, of technical and socioeconomic order, including that of the majority of agricultural soils (slopes and upland) being of small useful depth and with a “vocation” for erosion, so that the mobilization of the soil for tractors could prove to be prejudicial when it exceeds the arable horizon. There existed the wrong idea that, with mechanization, the unitary incomes of the cultivations would increase, when the maximum that would happen was the increase of production. The motorization starts by being a cultural question that demands from the farmer a relationship with the [tractor] engine in the areas of

maintenance, proper functioning, planning, programming, purchase of spare parts, tractor drivers, mechanics, all of this taking time and consolidating themselves in a gradual and slow form. Finally, the financial sustainability of the tractor is tied to its use in commercial farming, being able to devastate the food security of family production units and consequently of the country.

The indiscriminate “recovery of *bolanhas* [paddy fields],” made uninterruptedly and without criteria, to increase the cultivated land and gain political dividends as the only objective, was put at stake by Cabral who held that the great challenge Guinean agriculture faced was to increase the incomes of farmers in order to have more production and not to bet on only increasing the cultivated areas. In the recovery of the *bolanhas*, the case is the more pertinent since these are soils with specific characteristics, of which the acidity and salinity levels are determinant in rendering the farm unviable or only obtain from them low incomes that do not justify the investment. It serves no purpose to recuperate *bolanhas* where reduced rice productions are obtained. Curiously, to this day, this issue is still on the agenda, with decision makers and financial sponsors showing up to invest in the recoveries of *bolanhas* of doubtful and questionable production, *politique obligé*...

The fight against the degradation of soils due to cultural practices that favored their erosion, the choice of varieties that accentuate the reduction of their fertility, the increase of forest fires and the reduction of the time period of the fallow fields that limited the regeneration of the most fragile soils, were other dominant tonic of the agronomist thought of Cabral. He conducts various local studies and writes texts on studies undertaken in Fulacunda [in Quinara region of southern Guinea-Bissau] insisting on the need for the modification of farming techniques that contribute to the reduction of the risks of erosion and for the reinforcement of its fertilization, such as the use of the practice of consociation cultivation, prolongation of the period of the fallow land, and concern with the farming of prejudicial species, as *mancarra*.

It is interesting to note the environmental preoccupations of Cabral, at a time when such concerns did not exist, and especially his defense of a more advanced concept that today is still neither understood nor accepted by some fundamentalist ecologists. For Cabral “*Man is also nature*” and as such he is perceived as somebody that contributes to deregulate environmental resources, as he was seen as the indispensable promoter of their preservation, according to the different systems of production of the various ethnic groups, and his attitude towards the use that each one of them made of the ecosystems. “Environmentalist” Cabral made himself noted especially for his reservations about mechanization, soil erosion, uncontrolled forest fires, short periods for fallow lands, little use of consociation cultivation, and reduced practice of natural fertilization of the soils. He did not consider the farmer an *anti-environmentalist* that needed to

be “educated”, as still defended today by many, but as the determinant element who, managing the resources well, could use them beneficially.

This set of thoughts that Amílcar Cabral defended in a pragmatic way, shows to what extent he was an agronomist before its time, not costing us to accept that with him the post-independence era would have been very different.

THE STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE AS AN INTEGRATED DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

The way in which Cabral addressed the implementation of the agricultural census ends up having the same guiding principles that drives him to consider the preparation of the struggle for independence. In the census he was confronted with scanty human resources, lack of logistic means and little financial resources, but this did not impede him from moving the task forward with enormous success, in such a way that even today, 60 years later, he remains the source for any serious information needed. Furthermore, the Struggle is initiated with scarce resources, but it is equally a success, because it rests on the will, determination, conviction and competency of those involved. Contrary to “the habitual” tendency that still persists today, of us excusing ourselves with *lack of means* to justify our incapacity or disinterest, Cabral conceived a strategy through the valorization of the few resources that existed, conditioning the rhythm of advance and progress to its increase, and to obtaining the largest augment of them that could be made. During the whole period of the Armed Struggle, this was a sacred principle of Cabral consubstantiated in the watch words: “*do not make a step bigger than the leg*”.

Cabral opted for the gradual involvement of the peasants in the evolvement of actions, by phases, to the extent that the protagonists would acquire competencies and knowledge, without ever being in a hurry to accelerate the rhythm of implementation and end up “detaching” themselves from the rural militants. He never pressed a dynamics that burnt stages and demanded of the peasants, the largest nursery of combatants, activities for which they were not yet prepared, staking everything on their organization and capacitation. As happened in agriculture, the Armed Struggle starts with simple actions providing immediate results that excite and mobilize the participants, who would go on to understand and assume the mechanisms of conception and decision-making, gaining organizational maturity that allows them to assume new responsibilities.

As happens in agricultural associativism, it is important to have small, dynamic and consequential leadership groups, and not worth thinking that having plethoric directorates of militants is a good way of making everyone participate. When the group is large, a demission of

responsibilities starts to be verified, shoving its own functions and attributions to others and ending up being reduced to its minimum expression, with the inconvenience of them becoming unbelievers and inconsequent leaders. Privileging the decentralized creation of various actions groups according to the activities, in which the leaders will be involved by their engagement, capacity for team work, mobilization of human resources, and pragmatic creativity in the conduction of actions, the territorial occupation becomes more consequent.

At the beginning, a process of innovative development is always small, so that Cabral is obliged to start small and to evolve gradually to end with a large number of simultaneous, coordinated, and reciprocally potential initiatives. It would serve nothing to start at full speed, managing many initiatives at the same time to, in a short time and without experienced local cadres, lose direction and fall into discredit. The decentralization of the action groups favored that the best militants were quickly recognized, that they acquired greater power of initiative without being tied to a centralized and weighty structure.

For a process of development to be independent, it should involve the most diversified foreign partners possible, for which he was never limited to the East (China, USSR, and others of the Warsaw Pact), sensitizing Western countries like Sweden and militant organizations in the U.S.A., Germany, France, etc. Cabral, just as he was opposed to monoculture, staked heavily on the diversification that allowed him to guarantee *the independence of thought and action of the PAIGC*, and to bypass the Sino-Soviet conflict, which occasionally conditioned relations, without great problems.

Although Amílcar Cabral had dedicated, for obvious reasons, a particular attention to the armed front, he conceived the Struggle for Independence as a process where all the components of human life assumed equal importance: health, education, justice, trade, culture, local knowledge, international sensitization, infrastructures and agriculture. His training and practice as an agronomist certainly contributed to this perception, defending from the onset that he did not desire militarists but “armed militants”; that is, reminding all that the weapons were only one circumstantial moment and that the most important were the integral development of the country. The future came to show dramatically that Cabral lost his bet. If during the Struggle he was the Political Commissioner who directed the military commander, already few years after independence the soldier considered himself to be the only one responsible for the success of the Armed Struggle.

So dramatic are the consequences that have been registered, when Cabral always assumed himself as a profoundly antimilitarist person:

- from the outset he tries to persuade the colonial power for Independence to unfold in a peaceful way, without resorting to war, a position not accepted by Salazar, leader of one of the most retrograde dictatorships of Europe;
- throughout the 11 years of war, he always reaffirmed his readiness to negotiate, since, as he always said “both sides speak Portuguese and could understand each other each quickly”;
- during the Struggle, he reached the point of giving a rigorous order that the *Ponte de Saltinho* (Saltinho Bridge), over the *Corubal* river, should not be destroyed, in spite of the military benefits that could be gained by the guerrillas, in impeding a North-South linkage for the colonial troops. He justified this decision by asking: “and after independence, where are we going to search funds for its reconstruction?”

OTHER AGRONOMIC WORKS

Besides the work realized in Guiné-Bissau, Amílcar Cabral undertook agronomical activities in Portugal, Angola, and Germany, from March 1955, when he and Maria Helena are “expelled” from the country, after two and a half years of intense work.

There are numerous technical documents produced by Amílcar Cabral at the time, relative to those countries, having as objective:

- to gain financial resources that allowed him to live with dignity;
- to practice his profession earning new knowledge and experience;
- to await the moment to “leap” to the interior of Guiné-Bissau to pursue the struggle for the independence that he starts to organize as soon as, finished the course, left for Bissau.

We are not going to pronounce on these studies and documents, since they do not refer to Guinea-Bissau and are less relevant for Guinean agriculture.

FINAL NOTE

After the total liberation of Guinea-Bissau, in 1974, I saw only one person, Luis Cabral, Amílcar’s brother and the first President of the Republic, who understood his agronomist thought, seriously investing in agriculture, launching numerous projects and constantly following up enthusiastically, as well as encouraging the technical protagonists. Examples include frequent visits to the *Contuboeil* Rice Growing Center where, besides the research introduced for the first time in Guinea-Bissau, there was rice cultivation during the dry season, as wells the ENAVI, the public company of production of hens and eggs.

After him, no other president was interested or dedicated to the promotion and modernization of Guinean agriculture.

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To Bacar Cassamá, monitor of the *Granja de Pessubé* and veteran of the first hour, with whom I regrettably have not talked to for a while.

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To Clara Schwarz Da Silva, early hour friend of Amílcar and Maria Helena, and who undertook the translation of the texts "Feux de Brousse et Jachères dans le Cycle Culturel Arachid-Mils" and "À Propôs du Cycle Cultural Arachide-Mils en Guinée Portugaise" presented by Cabral in the Arachide-Mil Conference, in Bambey, Senegal in 1954, and who kindly provided unpublished photographs in which Amílcar Cabral is present and which form part of her personal collection.