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*Remembering the Liberation Struggles in Cape Verde: A Mnemohistory* traces the use in Cabo Verdean society of the memory of the liberation struggle waged by the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cabo Verde (PAIGC) and other actors from the 1950s onward. Miguel Cardina and Inês Nascimento Rodrigues offer an analysis of how such memory has been expressed through different public practices, symbolic meanings, and political appropriations. They argue that the liberation struggle became a “mnemonic device” in the archipelago, producing a constellation of representations that are subject to appropriations and disputes, resulting in its transformation into a tool of political agency (p. 6). The book builds on Cardina’s and Rodrigues’s previous work on a similar topic and forms part of a growing field of scholarship that addresses the construction of the memory of militants of the PAIGC elevated to the status of national heroes.[1]

As shown in the bibliography, Cardina and Rodrigues consulted archives in Portugal, as well as Cabo Verdean legislative documents, minutes of the National Assembly, newspapers, and film footage of diverse origins. In addition, the authors conducted interviews with twenty-one former PAIGC combatants, politicians, and scholars, among others. In four thematically and chronologically arranged chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue, Cardina and Rodrigues present Cabo Verde as a singular case among Portugal’s former colonies in terms of the construction of the memory of the liberation struggle. The introduction sets out the theoretical framework, situating the book vis-à-vis the approaches adopted by João Paulo Borges Coelho, Gregor Feindt et al., Jan Assmann, Marek Tamm, Berber Bevernage and Nico Wouters, and Berthold Molden.[2] In doing so, it explains how the concept of the “mnemonic device,” which is central to the argument of the book, builds on, but also differs from, similar concepts used by these authors.

The first chapter, “The Struggle as the Cradle of the Independent Nations,” deals with how the
liberation struggle operated as a “mnemonic device” during the First Republic in Cabo Verde from 1975 to 1991. The chapter provides background on the centrality the liberation struggle acquired in the state narrative during the first years of independence, its disparate meanings, political uses, and chronologies. Cardina and Rodrigues distinguish two phases during the single-party regime that demonstrate the use of the liberation struggle as a tool for interpreting Cabo Verdean history. In the first phase, the memory of the struggle facilitated highlighting colonial violence and the acts of resistance to which it gave rise and also refocused the relationship of Cabo Verde with the African mainland and with the meaning of the anti-colonial experience. To this end, the regime mobilized the memories of famines and their legacy; the figure of the PAIGC secretary-general, Amílcar Cabral; traditional art forms (especially the musical genres funaná, batuku, and tabanka); and the reconciliation with the intellectuals of the Claridade movement, depicted as promoters of Cabo Verde’s cultural autonomy. As for the second phase, the book reveals that from the second half of the 1980s onward the liberation struggle lost some of its explanatory importance for interpreting the country’s past. There were several reasons why this was the case, namely, the end of the union with Guinea-Bissau in 1980, the challenges the single-party regime faced, and the evocation of miscegenation as a defining aspect of Cabo Verdean history and culture.

In the second chapter, “The Struggle in the Mnemonic Transition,” the authors engage with the Second Republic, stressing that in the post-1991 period, after the first multiparty elections, political and economic liberalization triggered a process of revaluation, questioning, and reconfiguration of the use of the liberation struggle as a mnemonic device. Cardina and Rodrigues explore what they call a “mnemonic transition,” through which a new memorial landscape emerged in Cabo Verde as an alternative to the valorization of the liberation struggle in the aftermath of independence. Among the mnemonic changes that occurred, the chapter details the re-appropriation of figures and facts prior to 1975 sometimes closely associated with Portuguese colonialism, the process of de-Cabralization of national symbols, the recovery of monuments from colonial times and toponymical changes, the diversification of the officially recognized actors who participated in the struggle, and the repositioning of Cabo Verde as a Creole nation in between Africa and Europe.

The following chapter, “The Struggle and the Image of the Combatant,” shifts the narrative to how the Cabo Verdean state conceptualized and designed the statute of the combatant through legislation. Cardina and Rodrigues emphasize the narrow scope of the statute during the First Republic, recognizing only the direct participants in the PAIGC’s armed struggle while excluding other political trajectories. The authors also take the reader to the transition to the multiparty system, when, in the context of the mnemonic changes that occurred in the 1990s, a process of pluralizing the recognition of combatants took place. While highlighting the impact of pluralism, the book explains that the PAIGC leaders during the armed struggle lost centrality in favor of actors with lower visibility or recognition (clandestine militants and former political prisoners, namely, those imprisoned in the Tarrafal Concentration Camp).

[3] It also shed light on those who after independence challenged the single-party regime and fought for democracy. As the analysis enters the new millennium, the authors argue that Cabo Verde proceeded to update the representations of combatants, leading to the recognition of women’s contributions to the struggle. Admitting that the concept of “combatant” remains central to the country’s sociopolitical life, the book presents the last decade as a period when it became increasingly plural and acquired a broader meaning, to include those who resisted Portuguese colonialism, the agents behind the democratization pro-
cess, and the entire population that endured the adversities affecting the archipelago.

Although the PAIGC’s secretary-general, Cabral, is present throughout the book, he is the subject of thorough analysis in the last chapter, “The Struggle and Cabral’s Afterlives.” The figure of Cabral allows the authors to consider the changing interpretations of the struggle through his memorialization in monuments, political speeches, popular evocations, and public performances. Cardina and Rodrigues see Cabral’s symbolic place in Cabo Verde as being a decisive mechanism for both valuing and devaluing the struggle as a mnemonic device. While the First Republic constructed a narrative elevating him to the rank of a towering figure embodying the nation, the book demonstrates that the mnemonic changes during the 1990s reconsidered his career and legacy, as negative assessments emerged. The book also goes beyond Cabral’s memorialization exclusively linked to the state, the media, and the political arena, by underlining the appropriation of his figure by the popular imagination, namely, the Rabelados, a socioreligious community from the interior of the island of Santiago, and the Christian rationalists, a spiritualist current of thought from Brazil that spread to Cabo Verde. In the same vein, a brief account is provided of Cabral’s presence in urban culture, taking as an example the Marxa Kabral, a demonstration held annually since 2011. Marxa, Cardina and Rodrigues argue, has created a counter-memorialization of Cabral and works as a mnemonic performance operating in a parallel fashion, and sometimes as an alternative, to the political elite’s appropriations and institutionalization of his figure.

In the epilogue, the authors reflect on the book’s main argument that the liberation struggle became a central mnemonic device in the postcolonial period in Cabo Verde. Cardina and Rodrigues conclude that Cabo Verde is a country where a plurality and conflicting memories about the struggle have been constructed since 1975. While the authors wrote a book worthwhile and important for those interested in Cabo Verde’s postcolonial history, it would be useful to learn more about what was going on in Guinea-Bissau at least during the union with Cabo Verde. Unfortunately, the book does not provide an understanding of how the use of memory of the liberation struggle in Cabo Verde was similar or different from what was taking place at the same time in Guinea-Bissau. The book also does not allow the reader to appreciate that the process of memorialization was not limited to the struggle for independence of Cabo Verde but also extended to liberation struggles waged in other colonies and to figures with whom the PAIGC developed joint strategies. There are no references to how, for instance, Agostinho Neto of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and Eduardo Mondlane of the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) were memorialized by the Cabo Verdean authorities. Likewise, we do not find any information on how the Second Republic, although attempting to “de-Africanize” Cabo Verde’s identity, only partially replaced these figures in national symbols and references.

Readers seeking to understand the means used by the single-party regime in the memorialization of the struggle for independence are not informed about the role of PAIGC organizations, such as Os Pioneiros Abel Djassi (The Abel Djassi Pioneers, OPAD-CV), Juventude Africana Amílcar Cabral (Amílcar Cabral African Youth, JAAC-CV), and the Organização das Mulheres de Cabo Verde (Cabo Verde Women’s Organization, OMCV). Besides the indication that these PAIGC groupings promoted musical events, there are no other inputs on how they acted as agents in the dissemination of the memory of the liberation struggle among children, youth, and women. Similarly, Cardina and Rodrigues do not question the role of education in the construction of the memory of the liberation struggle.[4] In this connection, a couple of questions are left unanswered. How were the liberation struggle and the figure of Cab-
ral mobilized during the single-party regime through textbooks for children and youth? How did the Second Republic implement changes with educational reforms and the rewriting/replacement of textbooks?

Although these topics could have been explored in greater depth to strengthen the book, Cardina and Rodrigues’s work is a welcome contribution to scholarship on postcolonial history. Published in open access, the book will certainly reach the public in the archipelago and beyond, hopefully inspiring similar studies to enrich our knowledge of the Cabo Verdean path following independence.

Notes


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