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Educating the Masses

34

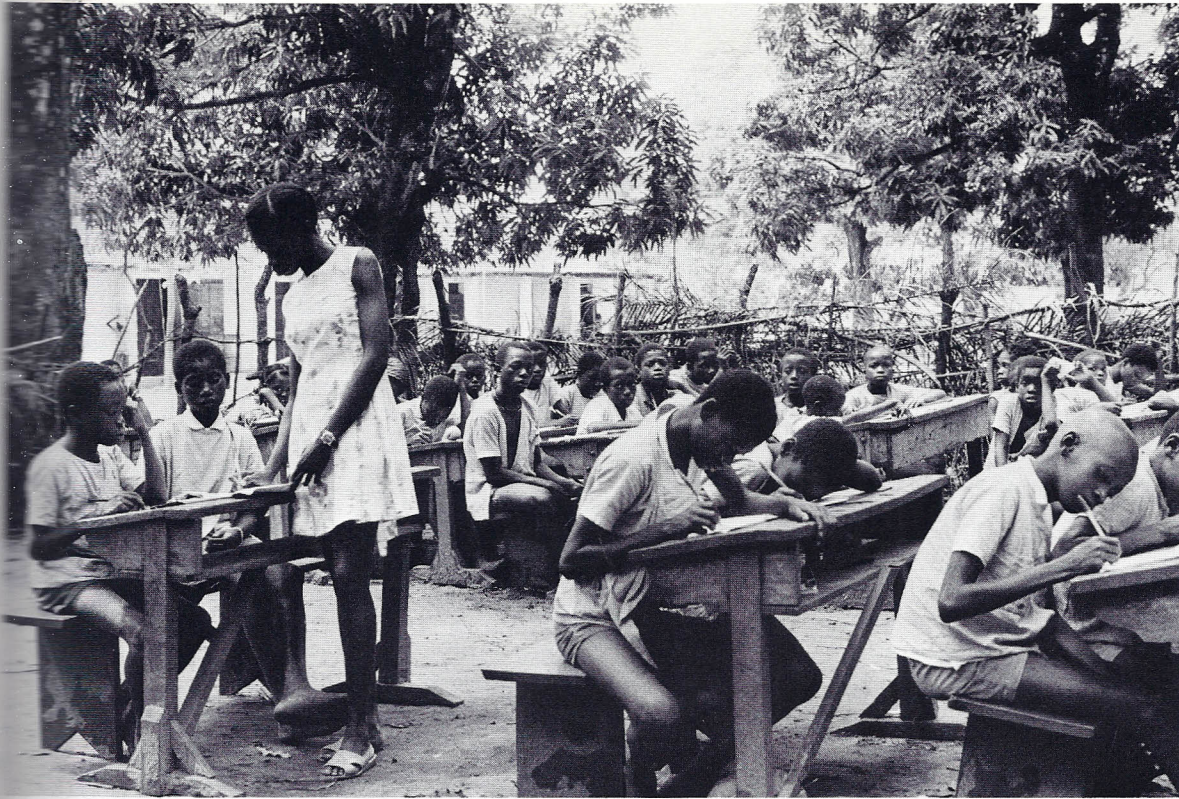
The Guinea-Bissau Approach

By Shirley Washington

The April 1975 issue of *New Directions* published an extensive essay by Dr. Sulayman Nyang on the political thoughts of the late Amilcar Cabral. In the essay, Dr. Nyang (then a faculty member at Howard University) reviewed some of the more salient features of Cabral's philosophy, which included his theories of colonialism, the armed struggle, and national liberation. The thread which connected the exposition of these theories was the cultural assertion of the people of Guinea-Bissau as a means to liberating themselves from Portuguese colonialism. The cultural resistance and resilience of the people were critical factors in the thinking of Cabral.

Keeping in mind the earlier work of Dr. Nyang, this essay will attempt to explore the educational process in independent Guinea-Bissau and how this process is adhering to the philosophy of Cabral. Also, it will seek to draw lessons from the Guinean educational experiences for Black Americans in the struggle to save the children from the educational malaise which prevails in American schools.

The former African colonies of Portugal were for several years engaged in an armed struggle for national liberation, which eventually brought about the collapse of the fascist regime in Lisbon in April, 1974. Now free, all of the former col-



PHOTOGRAPH BY STEPHANIE URDANG

ones are governed by the revolutionary leaders who led the armed struggle against the Portuguese.

The Partido Africano da Independencia da Guine e Cabo Verde (PAIGC) was considered (by the Organization of African Unity) to be the most successful liberation movement in Portuguese-speaking Africa in the mobilization of its people during the long armed struggle. Led by the PAIGC, the people fought for more than 15 years (1959-1974) for their freedom. In September 1973, with two-thirds of their territory liberated, the people of Guinea-Bissau elected their first popular national assembly, which declared the nation's independence without the consent of Portugal. A year later, it became the first of the former colonies of Portugal to have its independence formally recognized by Lisbon and by other Western nations, following the actions of the more than 80 nations who had already given recognition.

The Influence of Cabral

The leading theoretician behind the Guinean revolution was Cabral, one of 14 Africans from his country fortunate enough to obtain university education in 500 years of Portuguese colonialism. An agronomist by training, Cabral was famous for his brilliant intellect and his strong administrative and persuasive skills. The party which he led had an inner core of men and women who were dedicated not only to the gaining of independence but to the transformation of society whose character

would be egalitarian and non-exploitative.

The philosophy of the revolution is being transmitted to the young through a highly innovative system of education, which was inspired by Cabral. This system performs a critical role in the process of popular mobilization and the transmission of culture. As the principal initiator of the system of education in Guinea-Bissau, Cabral had called for the elimination of elitism in education by combining class work with agricultural work. There was to be more political content in both the classrooms and the textbooks. There was to be no corporal punishment or any other domination over children which would inhibit the development of their personalities.

The PAIGC program, much of which was written by Cabral, had a number of provisions in it concerning education. There was to be eventual free and obligatory education. All teaching centers and technical institutions were to be national property and controlled by the state. There was to be a general reform of teaching methods, and the further development of secondary and technical education.

The provision of social services for the population of Guinea-Bissau by the Portuguese, including educational opportunities, was negligible. In fact, it was the international condemnation of Portugal's colonial practices, notably at the United Nations, that brought about the abolition of what was then known as the "Native Statutes" in 1961. Until then, no native

child was allowed to attend a state school. Therefore, basic education for African children was provided by private missionary schools.

According to PAIGC sources, there were only 43 private primary schools open to about 800 students in 1962 in the areas under Portuguese control. Though the official colonial figures were much higher, the figures still reflected tremendous neglect. The secondary educational situation was even more serious since the Portuguese did not open a high school until 1958, and even then most of the students were children of the *assimilados*—a category of Africans who have acquired Portuguese citizenship by successfully adapting the culture, language and religion of Portugal.

During the armed struggle, the situation in the liberated zones was in sharp contrast to those areas under Portuguese control. The PAIGC, from 1969 through 1970, operated 157 village schools with approximately 6,500 boys and 2,000 girls, and about 250 teachers.

In most of the literature available on the armed struggle in Guinea-Bissau, there is some mention of the schools, which now serve as the backbone of the educational system in the country. Lars Rudebeck, a social science observer, in his book, *Guinea-Bissau: A Study of Political Mobilization*, describes the schools as "simple and functional" in construction, "easy to move" and climatically well-suited to the



surroundings. Such schools usually had "only a roof covered with straw or palm leaves over rows of benches made from branches of rough boards. A blackboard behind the teacher's desk is attached to one of the poles holding the roof." This generally understated appearance was both practical and a part of the strategy used to protect the children from Portuguese aerial attacks.

These attacks were a constant menace to the children. Still, learning did take place. Ironically, the atmosphere actually provided for the encouragement of learning as a political act of self-defense in a struggle with a vicious enemy.

The children of Guinea-Bissau lacked many things that Americans consider essential yet learning took place. But how? The answer seems to lie in the motivation of both the teachers and the students to overcome all obstacles. More importantly, the system of education was not only supportive of the learning process but the expectation level was high. These factors appear to be absent in many of the schools in the United States.

Objectives and Philosophy of Education

Work is underway to complete reform of instruction, both in form and content, to conform to the ideals of the PAIGC. This includes instructing the masses in ways to put at their disposal scientific and technical knowledge.

Mario Cabral, the state commissar of National Education (no relation to Amilcar Cabral), observed that education in colonial Guinea was to create mediocre intermediaries to serve the interests of imperialism, economic and social domination.

The PAIGC schools during the struggle for independence made a number of changes to combat the bad effects of the colonial educational system. In history classes, for instance, Portugal was deemphasized. Instead, students were taught the historical development of nations: why some advanced and others did not. The emphasis was on politics, bearing in mind that the people were actively involved in a war of liberation. Since independence, however, the emphasis has been on organization, teacher-student relation, and the environment. Mario Cabral noted that there was no intention on the part of the government to educate young people to go through the usual bourgeois training for the purpose of exploiting the masses. Students in the secondary school system are now being educated to serve the country by going into the countryside and living with the people and teaching them. The students also participate in agricultural work.

Mario Cabral perceives education as being an integral part of the society's development and the solution to its problems. He sees the schools as laboratories and greenhouses; the students as plants who are prepared and planted in society

to help transform it for the better. Society also influences the schools, sometimes adversely. Hence the need for progressive men and women as educators. He views education as a tool for the making of the "new man." And that the "imperatives of progress and instruction constitute the best ways to attain the efficient formation of the 'new man,' dreamed of and designed by our immortal leader, Amilcar Cabral. Man with his political conscience. Man in the meaning of life. Man with his creative capacities. Man in his social life in view of history."

The Contradictions

Two methods of education exist in Guinea-Bissau at the present time. The first is student-teacher participation in reciprocal learning, which grew out of the armed struggle. Its prime objective is the development of the nation. The second is the authoritarian system inherited from the colonialists. It is the objective of the educational establishment of Guinea-Bissau for the second method to be completely absorbed by the first. This was initiated as soon as the PAIGC government took over the areas that had remained under Portuguese administration before independence.

In the urban areas where the PAIGC had not been able to operate openly during the armed struggle, there were many problems in education left by the departing colonialists. The children and teachers



who were in the primary and secondary schools in the cities were oriented toward the Portuguese system. Noting the problems of dualism in the educational transition, a foreign visitor (George Houser of the American Committee on Africa) pondered the matter. "How do you reeducate those who have been in a different culture, a different civilization, and a different educational system for so many years to make them feel a part of what the PAIGC is trying to create in the country?" This is perhaps the new system's biggest challenge.

Teachers who are drawn from the towns have difficulty in adjusting to schools which are managed democratically by students and teachers. This concept of collective responsibility is quite unsettling for many teachers who were trained in the standards of Portuguese culture, wrote Paul Fauvet in *African Development*, March 1976.

This idea of the collective versus the individual permeates the new system of education. Mario Cabral explained that the system was the mirror opposite of the colonial system in terms of values. For instance, the new educational policy brought about the introduction of collective grading and collective diploma in stark contrast to the colonial system, which stressed individual achievement in grades. This concept has mostly been applied to students in the rural areas. However, even in the urban schools, which

have not as yet begun grading collectively in such subjects as science, students work in small groups where the contribution to the group is more important than individual success. Some subjects such as mathematics and science are still being graded individually until ways can be devised to grade a group.

The new educational system puts Guinea-Bissau in the center of the learning experience. Such universal subjects as science and mathematics are selectively retained while rejecting some of the more Western-oriented subjects, for example, European literature. While attempting to regain their own culture and minimize Western culture, Guineans desire to strengthen scientific knowledge, and according to Mario Cabral, "giving priority to the exact sciences and experimentation." The problem, however, is the need for Guineans to exercise critical discernment in their selection process. Cabral agrees that there are certain subjects which are associated with Western culture that are necessary for progress.

The whole matter of cultural identity and language in the new educational system of Guinea-Bissau is full of challenges. Mario de Andrade, an Angolan man of letters, who has been involved in the Guinean revolution for some time, noted the general perception of culture. "We understand culture as an extension of the struggle which is the first modern cultural manifestation in this country."

During the struggle, the matter of using the Creole language as the national tongue in instruction was debated. The PAIGC decided to retain Portuguese as the national language because of the many unwritten African languages in Guinea-Bissau. Creole, which is widely spoken in the country, is a combination of the various African dialects and somewhat archaic Portuguese.

The dilemma for the educational system in Guinea-Bissau is the inheritance of Portuguese as the national language while it is Creole, in many instances, that the students speak. The textbooks are printed in Portuguese, with the incorporation of Creole words which have meaning to the average Guinean. There are plans in the future to put Creole into a written form. In the meantime, both languages are used in the schools when students exhibit difficulty with Portuguese. While the discussions in the classroom may be in Creole, all written material is usually in Portuguese.

These are but a few of the contradictions and dilemmas of the new educational system of Guinea-Bissau as the country goes through a transition from the Portuguese colonial system to an egalitarian system.

Institutions of Learning

Inside the administrative structure of the Commissariat of National Education, there is a unit called the Friendship Institute, which administers foreign assistance to



Guinea-Bissau's educational institutions. This institute grew out of the armed struggle and was formed in 1965 with headquarters in Conakry, the Republic of Guinea.

Since the end of the armed struggle, and with the present stage of national reconstruction, the Friendship Institute was made a unit of the Education Commissariat, with the responsibility to establish *internatos* (boarding schools) in every region of the country.

The *internatos* are one of the most innovative institutions created by the PAIGC in the field of education. More than 2,000 children are now being educated in these institutions throughout the country. Their purpose is to serve "the children of the martyrs and the fighting men of Guinea and Cape Verde." But Amilcar Cabral had perceived of the *internatos* as an institution in which to mold new habits in the general populace and particularly "to raise the level of work" of the people. He disfavored transforming them into an asylum for children left without parents. However, the *internatos* have taken on some asylum characteristics, since a criteria for acceptance into these special schools is that the children be off-spring of martyrs or former guerrillas.

Teachers and the students cooperate in the management of the *internatos* in a democratic manner. All are co-educational, dedicated to fostering the spirit of collective responsibility and service to

the people. Life in the *internato* involves "not only formal studies, but also active participation, through an elected student committee, in the direction of the school," wrote Lars Rudebeck in *Guinea-Bissau*. There is "student responsibility for sharing maintenance and agricultural work and for assisting in the kitchen.

All of the *internatos* are impressive schools, but the most advanced of them is the *Escola Piloto* or the Pilot School, which opened in 1964. The school's curriculum terminates one grade higher than the other *internatos*. It also offers special classes for teachers in the interior during the summer vacation. Students are chosen on the basis of competitive examinations, and most of the graduates go on to secondary school or abroad for further study.

For those young people not fortunate enough to get into the *Escola Piloto* or the *internatos*, the government provides alternative educational opportunities, such as vocational training. For example, a Professional Training Center was opened in November 1976. Trainees enroll, after completing primary school, for a three-year course consisting of practical training and theoretical studies. The students share the planning of the daily programs.

Adult Education

Guinea-Bissau is not only concerned with the education of its children but also its largely illiterate adult population. A good deal of effort is being exerted on their be-

half, and several adult schools have been opened since independence, to teach not only basic skills in literacy but also the new political and social ethos of the party. These institutions are also designed to stem the tide of rural exodus to the cities by making adult education available in the rural areas.

There is a critical and chronic shortage of teachers in the country. Several solutions to this problem are now being implemented. A short-term solution is the concept of pedagogic seminars. Most primary school teachers have a limited education, but since 1975, the Education Commissariat has secured more teachers by accelerated three-year programs of teachers teaching each other. Fortunately, there is now a long-term solution available with the opening of a teacher's college in 1977—the nation's first post-secondary institution.

Another short-term solution involves overseas training for post-secondary studies. Approximately 600 students have gone abroad as of May 1977.

The Literacy Campaign

Amilcar Cabral was resolute on the matter of universal literacy after the war ended. "After independence, everyone will have to read and write: we cannot have the people tricked by the printed page," explained Cabral in *Armed Struggle in Africa*, by Gerard Chaliand. The matter of illiteracy preoccupies Guinea-Bissau, be-

cause it is regarded as a great impediment in the struggle for development. Hence the establishment of the National Literacy Commission, the organ responsible for eradicating illiteracy in the country. One of the goals of the PAIGC, as explained by Secretary General Aristides Pereira, is to have all militants reach a certain level in order "to interpret the evolution that our own society is rapidly undergoing."

The literacy campaign has been successful. By mid-1975, it was 65% due largely to the efforts of the youth wing of the PAIGC. The most success thus far has been among the soldiers. During the struggle, the fighters received basic literacy skills, along with political training. This perhaps helped their understanding of the national realities while raising their own level of knowledge. Now the military claims, according to Mario Cabral, more than 80% of its members on active duty are literate.

In the urban centers, a campaign is currently underway to eradicate illiteracy among the workers of the state-operated People's Stores. The main purpose is to elevate worker productivity through personal development so that the worker will make a meaningful contribution to the reconstruction of Guinea-Bissau.

There is a sense of immediacy about education in its applicability to the new requirements in society. There is no attempt to divorce education from the ob-

jective conditions of the nation. The Ivory Tower approach to education is systematically assailed, and for the most part, effectively eliminated.

The practicality of the Guinean approach to education manifests itself in the garden that almost always is adjacent to any school building. The garden is kept as part of the effort not to divorce production from mental endeavors. In other words, education is seen as a whole process in which there is both mental and manual aspects to it. The idea is to structure education in a way that more accurately mirrors life in Guinea-Bissau.

The theory behind these endeavors is the elimination or reduction of elitism with its emphasis on dividing society into the privileged few and the less fortunate in society. Elitism is a particularly troublesome feature whose elimination is considered desirable in an egalitarian society.

In Guinea-Bissau, education is deliberately given an unusually high political content in order to bring about the desired changes in society. The environment of education is calculated to change the manner in which human beings relate to each other. In the *internatos*, for example, the children are trained in an atmosphere almost in isolation from external factors in order to more readily absorb the new values.

The education is geared to the development of society and the acquisition of skills in order to contribute to that society.

The old traditional African philosophy never made a sharp distinction between theory and practice. There is a fusion of the idea of cooperation in a social vision embracing socialist-oriented society with the older African tradition of ideas and practice about the group within the perspective of modernity and beyond tribal groupings.

In about four years, the Guineans have done remarkably well in accelerating a declining illiteracy rate.

Amilcar Cabral's dictum to learn from books, to learn from life, but always learn, is valid here. It is in stark contrast to the prevailing sentiment among many Black American students to learn in order to get a job. Indeed, this is important, but there is an intrinsic value to learning as a political act of self-defense.

The leaders of Guinea-Bissau offer a model in this respect through their deliberate and consistent efforts to develop an educational system which stresses non-elitism, egalitarianism and service to the people. The probable outcome of such efforts is the liberation and reconstruction of the nation as a whole for the benefit of everyone. □

Shirley Washington received the Ph.D. degree in political science from Howard University in May. She spent some time in Guinea-Bissau in connection with gathering material for her doctoral dissertation, "Some Aspects of Post-war Reconstruction in Guinea-Bissau."