

# DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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**RIBEIRO, Orlando da Cunha** (Lisbon, 16/2/1911 - Vale de Lobos, Sintra, 17/11/1997)

Orlando da Cunha Ribeiro was the son of a Viseu pharmacist who had a pharmacy in Lisbon in Rua da Escola Politécnica (São Mamede neighbourhood). His mother died when he was 5 years old and he was raised mostly by his maternal grandparents, Amélia, from Viseu, and Augusto Carvela from Chaves. He was therefore familiar in his childhood both with different parts of the countryside where his grandfather, who had eventually retired as a military major, was successively posted, and the environment of a Lisbon neighbourhood where the university buildings and the Imprensa Nacional [National Press] lined the Jardim Botânico [Botanical Garden]. In his *Memórias* [Memoirs] (2003), Orlando Ribeiro recalled how he had socialised with several intellectuals from an early age. On the recommendation of A. Celestino da Costa (1884-1956), one of his classmates' father who would later become President of the Junta de Educação Nacional [National Education Council], Orlando Ribeiro was awarded small scholarships as of 1934 which offered him the opportunity to progressively discover the various regions of Portugal. In August 1935, he was invited to participate in a conference on a Holiday Cruise organised to show the country's intellectual elite the wide and diversified colonial territories in Africa that were mostly unknown. He met Marcelo Caetano on this cruise who later assisted him in getting a position as lecturer of Portuguese in Paris, two years after obtaining his doctorate in Lisbon.

His intellectual curiosity had prompted him very early in life to complement the education he had received at the Faculdade de Letras de Lisboa [Faculty of Arts of the University of Lisbon] with diverse courses that opened new horizons and led to the practice of several research techniques. The introduction to Arabic lectured by Professor David Lopes (1867-1943), who had shown him the relevance of Portugal's Islamic past, or his lessons with Swiss geologist Ernest Fleury (1878-1958), the only university professor in Lisbon who had encouraged him to do "fieldwork" and who had taught him to fill his notebook with notes and sketches, are two examples among others worth mentioning. During his youth he cultivated a quasi-filial relationship with the elderly Leite de Vasconcelos (1858-1941), whose moral and intellectual influence he carried with him throughout his life. Indeed, it was only in 1988 that the 10th and last volume of Leite Vasconcelos's *Etnografia Portuguesa* [Portuguese Ethnography] was published by the Imprensa Nacional (*Mestres, Colegas, Discípulos*



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[Masters, Colleagues, Disciples], I, p. 87-374) thanks to Ribeiro's persistent joint efforts with Manuel Viegas Guerreiro (1912-1997), his colleague and friend.

Upon conclusion of his secondary education at the Liceu Passos Manuel (1921-28), Orlando Ribeiro completed a degree in History and Geography at the Faculdade de Letras de Lisboa (1928-32), with conflicting memories as to the quality of the teaching he had received. He mainly recalled the beneficial, albeit brief influence of two of his Masters, who had met with an early death: Manuel de Oliveira Ramos (1862-1931), an elderly, blind professor who had taught him how to effectively take notes of the readings Ribeiro made for him, and Silva Teles (1850-1930), a medical doctor of the Navy, born in Goa, who had lectured Geography from 1904 in Curso Superior de Letras [former Faculty of Arts ] and whose classes had been "beautifully taught". Ribeiro considered Silva Teles's successor, Luís Schwalbach (1888-1956), to be a mediocre teacher. Notwithstanding the efforts of Leite de Vasconcelos to arrange brief meetings between Ribeiro and Aristides de Amorim Girão (1895-1960), a renowned Geography Professor at the Universidade de Coimbra [Coimbra University], the relationship between these two strong-minded characters had never been easy. The sudden invasion of France by Nazi forces in May 1940 had forced Orlando Ribeiro to take up the post of Professor Extraordinário [non- permanent position] in Coimbra, which he exchanged in March for the position of Full Professor in Lisbon.

His education had been marked by two major influences. First, the influence of Leite de Vasconcelos between 1930 and 1936. The elderly scholar had taught him to systematically travel across the diversified Portuguese territory and to make friendly acquaintances with the villagers, systematically taking note of his observations. Shortly afterwards, Orlando Ribeiro had joined the international French School of Geography, in Paris, directed by Emmanuel de Martonne (1873-1955) and Albert Demangeon (1877-1940), to become a disciple of both between 1937 and 1940. In his "Paris years", he had socialised with masters and fellow students from different fields and nationalities, acquiring a perfect command of the French language while practising English and toiling with German (Mestres, Colegas, Discípulos, 2016-17). He had then embarked upon a new doctorate, under the joint supervision of De Martonne and Demangeon, on Beira Baixa, the vastly diversified transition region between the North and South of Portugal.

While Orlando Ribeiro was highly familiar with Portugal, he knew nothing about the Spanish regions, even the neighbouring ones, as the dramatic Civil War had made it impossible to visit Spain between 1936 and 1940. However, Franco's triumph would lead to the rebirth of Iberian scientific contacts. Having lost the incentive of his Parisian masters and fellow scholars (except for rare and brief contacts of a clandestine nature), Orlando Ribeiro received the excellent support of his Spanish fellow scholars thus realising how important it was to position Portugal's personality within the Iberian context and, more widely, within the Mediterranean context. This is clearly perceptible in the title he chose for his first book, still renowned today: Portugal, o Mediterrâneo e o Atlântico [Portugal, the Mediterranean and the Atlantic], published in Coimbra in 1945. In fact, while it is true that this work deals mainly with Portugal, its title points to two broad future syntheses, which



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had been long in the making: both the book *Mediterrâneo, Ambiente e Tradição* [Mediterranean, Environment and Tradition], published by Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian [Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation] in 1968, and *La Zone Intertropicale Humide* [The Humid Intertropical Zone], in co-authorship with myself, and edited by Armand Colin, in 1973.

With the end of World War II in September 1945, the elderly Professor De Martonne, President of the Associação Internacional de Geografia [International Association of Geography] since 1938, tried to maintain the much-threatened intellectual predominance of a ruined and divided Europe. To that end, he encouraged his young Portuguese disciple to take up the difficult task of swiftly organising the first post-war International Congress of Geography in Lisbon. Orlando Ribeiro rose bravely and efficiently to this challenge and the international congress was held to everyone's satisfaction in April 1949, leading to a wealth of important publications (5 volumes of *Comunicações* [Papers] and 6 *Livros Guias de Excursões* [Excursion Guidebooks]).

This success was largely due to the enthusiasm of a small group of young researchers from diverse specialisations, mostly doctoral students, belonging to the Centro de Estudos Geográficos [Centre for Geographical Studies] of the University of Lisbon (CEG-UL). Their sole support, albeit symbolic, came from renowned admiral Gago Coutinho and, at the administrative level, the efficient aid of Herculano Amorim Ferreira, a physicist who had just created the Portuguese Weather Service. Five excursions were made to present the diverse regions of the Continent, and the Congress was held in Lisbon between 8th and 15th April; it was then prolonged by a trip to Madeira Island where some of the illustrious guest speakers were joined by the young people whose enthusiasm had made it possible to successfully manage this difficult international challenge.

This festive occasion was, however, met by a period of adversity when the funding for the Congress was exhausted. In the years to follow, it was only possible to obtain funding occasionally, to undertake research in the distant, barely known overseas territories. In 1947, Orlando Ribeiro travelled to and described Portuguese Guinea, on the pretext of a soon to be held Pan-African Congress and, in 1951-1952, he completed the monograph *Ilha do Fogo* [Fogo Island], based on the brutal volcanic eruption that had struck the island. It was by evoking hostile international politics that he obtained funding to study Goa in 1955 and travel around Angola and Mozambique as of 1960. He had, in fact, managed to convince a number of influential politicians that it was necessary to have sound knowledge of the territories that were mostly ignored at the scientific level. This pioneering research was undertaken both by himself and by his first disciples, Raquel Soeiro de Brito, Mariano Feio and Francisco Tenreiro.

Conditions suddenly improved after this financially difficult phase. In 1959, CEG-UL was offered good premises on the new University campus, but it was mainly due to the unexpected establishment of the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian [Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation] in Portugal and to the decision of its directors to prioritise the funding of innovative artistic and scientific activity lines, that CEG-UL managed to



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offer internships abroad, thus enabling young geographers to acquire new, efficient study techniques and many quality publications, among which the long-standing dream publication of the *Finisterra* journal.

In 1960, as a young French geographer, I just happened to discover Portugal and travel in the country in the company of Orlando Ribeiro, who I eventually married in 1965, having then begun to collaborate in the activities of CEG-UL. I had been educated in Paris at the end of the war by the direct disciples of the masters with whom Orlando Ribeiro had become acquainted in the run-up to the conflict. Our education was therefore quite similar, mine being enriched by the sudden technical progress resulting from the vast and free dissemination of American aerial photographs, which for the first time enabled a detailed overview of the topography and human occupation of the globe, thus giving rise to rapid progress in world cartography.

By this time Orlando Ribeiro had succeeded single-handedly in placing Portugal on the world map, thanks to his successive journeys along the Atlantic and in Africa from 1935, in Spain and throughout the Mediterranean world from 1946, in America in 1952 and in India in 1956. In 1973, our overview of the globe was published as a university manual addressing *La Zone Intertropicale Humide*, that extremely vast stretch of land, alternately oceanic and continental, regularly lighted and heated by the Sun, which divides the globe into two so utterly different hemispheres.

After this lengthy introduction to Orlando Ribeiro's education and to his first main relevant accomplishments, both from an organisational and scientific perspective, the delicate issue of the specific nature of his intellectual and professional orientation should now be addressed. Was Orlando Ribeiro a mere geographer? To what extent was he not also a historian? An ethnologist? Or, to use a more comprehensive term, a humanist? His basic education clearly favoured History and Literature; but his strongest intellectual encouragement did not stem thereof, but rather, as noted above, from chance acquaintances or his own pursuit of highly diverse figures who piqued his curiosity. Other distinctions must be made when considering Orlando Ribeiro's extremely vast scientific work (Ana Amaral and Ilídio Amaral, *Bibliografia Científica de Orlando Ribeiro* [Scientific Bibliography of Orlando Ribeiro], 1984; Suzanne Daveau, *Segunda Parte* [Part Two] (1981-1995), *Finisterra*, 61, 1996, p. 81-97). It may first be noted that he was as interested in the various thematic aspects addressed in the vast scales of the *Mundo Português* [Portuguese World] or in the *Zona Intertropical* [Intertropical Zone] as he was in monograph-type studies, on any scale, ranging from that of a village (Castro Laboreiro), a town (Sertã), or a city (Lisbon, Venice or Toledo), to a more or less defined region (the Arrábida mountain range, Central Portugal) or an Island (Madeira, Fogo) or even immense territories such as Brazil and Angola. Nevertheless, the underlying theme of the numerous interpretation attempts that Orlando Ribeiro applied to the diversified fragments of the earth's surface appears to have always been similar: he tried to understand the relations by linking Man to Earth at the very time he was studying them, that is, in what for him constituted the Present. In fact, the brief moment between Past and Future is the only moment open to the researcher's direct observation – it is what allows him to observe and better understand the connections



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between Environment and Society, without neglecting the marks left by foregone times, no matter how remote and semi-erased.

I am therefore of the opinion that Orlando Ribeiro cannot be considered a true historian, that is, a researcher concerned, above all, with the reconstruction of humanity's bygone days. It was essentially the present world he wished to describe and understand, in its unstable fragility – but without failing to consider what he managed to learn of past times, since they are still responsible for some of the human characteristics and activities of the present, and which still leave an imprint on today's landscape. Orlando Ribeiro was a geographer, or rather a humanist who always attributed major importance to both historical and natural features – to Time and Space – to better understand the meaning of the presence of “Man on Earth”.

In his view, history, the science of the reconstruction of the past, was a useful tool and rich source of data, as was also the Landscape (captured and recorded in hasty sketches scrawled on his field notebooks, and his countless, carefully selected photographs), and the other related sciences, Geology, Pre-History and Ethnology.

As a researcher, the historical theme he was most concerned about was undoubtedly the Formação de Portugal [Formation of Portugal]. As early as April 1939, this was the title chosen by the then young Lecturer of Portuguese at the Sorbonne for a conference held in Brussels at the Instituto de Cultura Portuguesa [Portuguese Culture Institute]. In 1955, he further examined the same theme in chapter III of his volume on Portugal published in Castilian, in Barcelona. In 1968, the Dicionário de História de Portugal [Dictionary of the History of Portugal], organised by Joel Serrão, featured a 19-page long article on this theme while Ribeiro busied himself preparing a book with the same title, which was to feature a collection of several of his previously published articles. However, this book was only published in 1987, in the Coleção Identidade [Identity Collection] of the Instituto de Cultura e Língua Portuguesa. Its 3000 copies have long sold out but a new edition with an introduction by João Carlos Garcia has been published by Editorial Letra Livre [Letra Livre Publishers].

In the meantime, Orlando Ribeiro continued his research on this theme and published *Estudo Crítico às Introduções Geográficas à História de Portugal* [Critical Essay on the Geographical Introductions to the History of Portugal] in 1977 in the Imprensa Nacional, dedicated to “The History students from the Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa who for two decades accompanied my teachings on Human Geography.” As stated in the preface, he discussed the work of several historians, either with admiration or harsh severity: “I have never forgotten that, while I have been a geographer for over forty years, it was the vocation of historian, grounded mainly in Herculano, that led me to the Faculdade de Letras where I met some remarkable, terrible and a few rare average professors.” This book features sharp criticism of the work of three well-known historians - Oliveira Martins (1845-1894), Jaime Cortesão (1884-1980) and António Sérgio (1883-1969) – and claims paradoxically, in conclusion, that the “long confrontation” that had been undertaken, “ended up (...) in failure (because) the least that could be said (...) was that the authors knew very little of what they purported to address. They refer to specific works without citing them and largely ignore most of the existing bibliography





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on the topic at the time. (...) I would like to ask historians to pay as much attention to Geography as the well-informed geographers have paid to their work.”

Among those praised or harshly criticised by Orlando Ribeiro, both distant predecessors (Camões and Alexandre Herculano) and other more recent authors (Alberto Sampaio, Oliveira Martins, António Sérgio and Jaime Cortesão) feature, and even some who had been Ribeiro’s masters (Manuel de Oliveira Ramos and David Lopes) or colleagues of his generation (Torquato Soares, Albert Silbert, Virgínia Rau and Magalhães Godinho). These numerous texts can be easily accessed today as they have been compiled in *Universidade, Ciência, Cidadania* [University, Science, Citizenship] (2013), in *Opúsculos Geográficos* [Geographical Booklets] (2nd edition, volume I, 2014) and in *Mestres, Colegas, Discípulos* (2016-17).

Albert Silbert (1915-1996) appears to be a case in point. Having survived World War II, this French historian came to Portugal to prepare “a methodical, comprehensive monograph” entitled *Le Portugal Méditerranéen à la fin de l’Ancien Régime* [Mediterranean Portugal at the end of the Ancien Regime], published in 1966. Orlando Ribeiro devoted a booklet (*A Evolução Agrária no Portugal Mediterrâneo, segundo A. Silbert* [The Agrarian Evolution in Mediterranean Portugal according to A. Silbert]) to the analysis of this work, thus beginning a new CEG-UL collection with the title *Chorographia, Série Histórica* [Chorographia, Historical Series]. This booklet is by no means one of his most renowned works and does not boast a beautiful style, but it is in this text that Orlando Ribeiro sought to clarify the differences and similarities between the Geographer’s and the Historian’s viewpoints.

In fact, the space studied by Silbert as the theme for a planned French thesis largely coincided with that chosen by Ribeiro himself, thirty years earlier, that is, the vast plains of Beira Interior and of the North of the Alentejo where the twofold transition between the North and South of Portugal and between the Atlantic and Mediterranean worlds occurs. Upon careful analysis, Orlando Ribeiro concluded (p. 226) that the “organisation” of this vast space was a result of its rural way of living, which “is scarcely accessible to History and must also be addressed by means of direct observation and inquiry, used by other sciences such as Geography and Ethnology.” This is, therefore, a mitigated conclusion that acknowledges the specific axis of each and every scientific speciality, but also the wide margins where diverse viewpoints overlap and are capable of mutual clarification.

Orlando Ribeiro’s last work, *A Colonização de Angola e o seu Fracasso* [The Colonisation of Angola and its Failure] is also particularly noteworthy. It was published in 1981 by the Imprensa Nacional and its first edition went almost unnoticed. Reedited in 2014, this book is still largely ignored today, even by the most highly valued scholars of African studies. Conceived and written at a time when long periods of depression allowed the author very brief moments of respite, this complexly structured work is perhaps the one that best accounts for his way of conceiving a historical-geographical theme. Its broad timeframe and the materials used range from the multiple landscapes observed in his frequent journeys between 1935 and 1969, to the conversations with random people he had happened upon, to his own family traditions and the reading material he had accrued



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since his youth. This is undoubtedly, as noted by historian René Pélissier in 1983, “a somewhat disconcerting work”, a “non-conformist book of which there are only a very few among learned men”, but it is also one of the books that provides a better understanding of the way Orlando Ribeiro worked.

Another way of characterising his work is by considering the impact it had on his disciples. As a university Professor, he was highly esteemed by a wide range of students from diverse areas, both for his brilliant lectures and also, perhaps even more so, for what he managed to convey to those taking part in his field trips. It is indeed by considering the work of some of his disciples that a better understanding of his historical-geographical view of the world can be achieved, a view that he shared with his disciples and with me, from the 1960s onwards when he took me on a methodical discovery of Portugal.

Almost all his first disciples chose a small island as the theme for their doctoral theses, thus following the model he had given them regarding Madeira in 1945, and Fogo in 1955. Such was the case of Raquel Soeiro de Brito in 1951, with the island of São Miguel, of Francisco Tenreiro in 1961, with São Tomé, and of Ilídio do Amaral in 1964, with Santiago. Carlos Alberto Medeiros followed suit when he devoted his first research to the small Island of Corvo in the Azores. Several years later, his doctoral thesis focused on a less common theme of historical Geography, namely a vast hinterland African region: *A Colonização das Terras Altas da Huíla* (Angola) [The Colonisation of the Huila Highlands (Angola)]. In the words of historian René Pélissier (*Le Sud-Angola dans l'Histoire*, [South Angola in History] 2017, p. 388), this is the masterpiece of a geographer who “cool-headedly and open-eyed” managed to pen “marvellous pages of social, economic, and political Geography.”

Other disciples of Ribeiro chose to adopt a trend that was dominant at the time: an early specialisation in one of the branches of Geography, such as Geomorphology, Climatology, Organisation of Space, Historical or Economic Geography. This was the case of Jorge Gaspar, for instance, who having published an excellent article of historical Geography in 1970 on “Os portos fluviais do Tejo” [“The inland ports of the Tagus River”], devoted his doctoral thesis to a “system of central functions and places”: *A Área de Influência de Évora* [The Area of Influence of Évora] (1972), thus becoming supervisor of a large group of disciples.

Orlando Ribeiro retired in February 1981 and although the next generation of geographers had ceased to be officially his students, several of them continued to seek his company. In 1986, CEG-UL published a second (and last) volume of the collection *Chorographia, Série Historica*, featuring an extensive study on the *O Espaço Medieval da Reconquista no Sudoeste da Península Ibérica* [The Mediaeval Space in the Reconquest of the South-western Iberian Peninsula], by João Carlos Garcia.

Ten years later, Garcia obtained his doctorate with an in-depth study of *A Navegação no Baixo Guadiana durante o Ciclo do Minério (1857-1917)* [Navigation in the Lower Guadiana River during the Iron Ore Cycle (1857-1917)], which addresses both the physical navigability of the river and the economic and political circumstances which, for several decades, had given rise to an animated navigation in its entrance section.



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In 1986, Júlia Galego and I jointly organised *Memória do C.E.G. [CEG Memorial]* entitled *Numeramento de 1517-1532. Tratamento Cartográfico [Population Count between 1517-1532 Cartographic Processing]*, that is, a study of the first general count of the Portuguese population in existence today. In 1987, it was Maria Fernanda Alegria, director of the *Laboratório de Geomorfologia do CEG-UL [Geomorphology Lab of CEG-UL]*, who devoted her doctoral thesis to a theme that was purely historical at first sight: *A Organização dos Transportes em Portugal (1850-1910). As Vias e o Tráfego [The Organisation of Transport in Portugal (1850-1910). Roads and Traffic]*, published in 1990 as *Memória do C.E.G.* It showed how the regional organisation of the mountains and the network of the navigable rivers crossing Portugal influenced the railway design and how this design became a settling element that strongly hindered the free evolution of national space.

Recent reeditions of much of the dispersed work of Orlando Ribeiro that I managed to make between 2013 and 2017, with the help of the *Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian*, offer easy access to his numerous scattered articles, particularly those resulting from the interest he always invested in the presence of Man on Earth and in the more or less dense and persistent mark imprinted on it by Man.

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