

E3 ORAL PRESENTATION – FULL ARTICLE

Egas Moniz and his Time

Victor Oliveira ¹

¹ MD, PhD. Neurologist; Board Member of the Sociedade das Ciências Médicas de Lisboa; Principal Investigator at Faculdade de Medicina – Universidade de Lisboa

✉ voliveira98@hotmail.com



This work is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

ABSTRACT: Egas Moniz was a prominent figure in the portuguese medicine and politics in the first half of the 20th century. His activity as a physician reached its peak in two major developments: cerebral angiography in 1927 and the surgical treatment of certain psychoses (leucotomy) in 1935. In the political arena, he held important positions as ambassador to Madrid, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and finally president of the Portuguese delegation to the Versailles Peace Conference. In this work, we present the environment in which he grew up and studied, while also revealing some of his personal tastes and interests.

KEYWORDS: Egas Moniz, angiography, leucotomy, Peace Conference in Versailles, Avanca

Early Life and Education

António Caetano Abreu Freire Egas Moniz (1874-1955) was born in the small village of Avanca, in a rural region of central Portugal: Estarreja, Aveiro, by the Atlantic coast.

He belonged to a family of petty rural aristocracy, economically decadent, of the type still predominant in Portugal in the second half of the 19th century, adherents of a conservative regime under strong influence of the Catholic Church.

His paternal grandfather had been a military commander in the so-called liberal fights for the absolutist faction in which the two brothers, heirs to the throne of Portugal, confronted each other: D. Miguel, defender of an absolutist regime, and D. Pedro IV, defender of constitutional rights of the French model, who would emerge victorious in 1834, after about six years of armed conflict.

On the other hand, his uncle and godfather, who was responsible for his primary education, was a priest and viewed with sympathy the young man's embrace of ecclesiastical life.

He then pursued secondary studies at the College of São Fiel near the town of Fundão, run by Jesuit priests, which was a top-level educational institution, distinguished in its scientific and humanistic components.

At this school, Egas Moniz's youth was overshadowed by several family tragedies. The most smashing was the death of his 16-year-old sister, a victim of tuberculosis.

Here, he had a definitive crisis of faith, as he neither understood nor accepted that an omniscient and benevolent God would allow his sister to pass away, still in early adolescence, without sins, while lapsed sinners continued to live with impunity.

Throughout his academic career at the University of Coimbra, he continued to lose close family members, eventually finishing his studies alone.

After graduating, he married the woman who would be his lifelong companion, Elvira, and began his path towards a doctorate, followed by a competitive examination for a professorship at the University of Coimbra.



For academic purposes, he presented the works “Sexual Life - Anatomy” and “Sexual Life - Pathology” (1901-1903), daring topics for the time, even in academic circles, but which he would publish in successive commercial editions over 30 years, becoming an editorial success with 18 editions.

Political Career and Academic Development

Right after graduating, he began his political career, being elected deputy to the monarchist national assembly in January 1900.

During the following years, he managed to reconcile politics in Lisbon with teaching at the University of Coimbra and attending some periods at the Neurology Clinic of the Salpêtrière in Paris.

In 1911, with the establishment of the republican regime and the creation of the Universities of Lisbon and Porto, he founded the clinic and university chair of neurology at the Santa Marta University Hospital in Lisbon.

He maintained political activity, with some interruptions, reaching its peak between 1918 and 1919 when he served as ambassador in Madrid, followed by that of Minister of Foreign Affairs, ending with the presidency of the Portuguese delegation to the Peace Conference in Versailles.

After resigning from these positions in March 1919 due to the political turmoil in Lisbon, he subsequently abandoned active politics, dedicating himself to clinical practice and teaching.

Scientific Achievements and Medical Legacy

Following his withdrawal from active politics in 1919, Moniz entered the most productive phase of his scientific career, which led to the development of cerebral angiography (1927) and, later (1935), to the surgical treatment of certain psychoses (leucotomy), work that earned him the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1949, shared with the Swiss physiologist Walter Hess.

During his time in Paris, he associated with the great names of French neurology, who were also prominent figures in world neurology, especially Joseph Babinski, with whom he was a close friend.

In the Parisian environment, he honed his taste for the most refined cuisine, becoming a true gourmet. To that end, he had the good fortune to frequent the home of Joseph Babinski, where his brother Henry held

sway, being a renowned master of French cuisine with published works.

Cultural Interests and Historical Context

Egas Moniz never left his homeland, Avanca, always showing it great affection. He rebuilt the old family home, the “Casa do Marinheiro” (sailors House) and spent the months of August and September there.

In Avanca, he always fought for its progress. Thus, he developed, with some friends, a dairy industry that would be incorporated into the well-known Nestlé company and which remains active to this day.

It was also his love for his homeland that led him to become close to the work of the writer Júlio Diniz (1839-1871), the greatest exponent of Portuguese Romanticism.

In fact, the writer spent several periods, in the last years of his short life, in the village of Ovar, near Avanca, where he sought rest and healthy air in his fruitless struggle against tuberculosis, which would defeat him at the age of 31.

Júlio Diniz described in his works, especially in “As Pupilas do Senhor Reitor” (1866), the rural environment and the characteristics of the population of the Ovar region, which were the same as that of neighboring Avanca.

Thus, who better than Júlio Diniz, with his sensitivity and mastery, to describe and praise these aspects so dear to Egas Moniz?

For this reason, the Portuguese neurologist, who was born 3 years after the writer's death, dedicated himself to the study of his life and work, as if seeing himself reflected in it.

His investigations included contact with survivors who lived with the writer, and he also collected, together with the family, unpublished works, mainly from his adolescence and early adulthood. This collection resulted in a book of over 600 pages, which constitutes the most complete biography of Júlio Diniz.¹

A somewhat surprising aspect is the fact that the book was published in 1924, a time of multiple activities in which Egas Moniz divided his efforts between directing the University Clinic of Neurology and the research that led to the discovery of cerebral angiography.

¹ *Júlio Diniz e a sua obra. Egas Moniz
Livraria Civilização – Editora, Porto 1924



Political environment post-war in Portugal

After leaving Versailles and returning to Portugal (1919), he faced an extremely unstable political situation that would culminate in the establishment of the “Estado Novo” (New State), under the direction of Salazar, with whom he had to live for the rest of his life.

Egas Moniz’s political past always provoked the aversion of the Salazar regime, causing resistance to the development of his Neurology Service and the lack of support he always suffered for his scientific work.

Despite this, he was respected for his medical and intellectual work, but with some detachment, which also included many colleagues who coexisted well with the status quo.

More than 150 years after his birth, he remains a recognized figure in the international medical community. While leucotomy is now of interest as a reference in the history of psychiatry, angiography is currently undergoing new developments with its application in vascular pathology, particularly in the treatment of the acute phase of some cerebrovascular accidents.