"We are too concerned with Africa"
Questioning and answering
with Elísio Macamo

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Introduction

If the social sciences today are in need of "a new language for theorizing" (Connell 2007: 383), African Studies provide an interesting field to spell out the specificities of that challenge. How does one navigate the divergent currents of universalism and relativism? How does one deal with normativity? How does one critique, replace and transform concepts and theories derived from "Northern" contexts, and how does one develop more inclusive bases for "intercultural dialogue in conditions of diversity" (Wiredu 2004: 13)? Elísio Macamo, professor at the Centre for African Studies Basel (CASB), has become a fascinating figure in these debates, not least because he straddles some of the most unlikely divides. Drawing inspiration from both postcolonial theorists and sociological classics, from positivists and constructivists alike, Macamo has written on issues as diverse as modernity (Macamo 2005, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2012, 2010), religion (2001, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2011a), development policy (Macamo 2006, 2010, Macamo 2014a, 2014b), risk (Bloemertz et al. 2012; Macamo 2015a), social movements (Macamo 2011b), political violence (Macamo 2014c, 2016a), African philosophy (1999; 2014; 2015b), Africa as an object of knowledge (Macamo 1999, 2014d, 2016b), urbanity (Macamo 2013; Obrist, Arlt, and Macamo 2013), youth (Macamo 2010), and technology (Macamo & Neubert 2014), and has given countless talks and interviews on further topics (see e.g. Adogame 2008). Those who have had the chance to hear Macamo speak at development conferences know about his ability to draw in different audiences to gradually entangle their humanistic concern for Africa into epistemological problems and self-interrogation. And those who try to decipher his theoretical stance, to pinpoint his position in the field, are confronted with an eclectic multiplicity of positions and fields that allows

much less for categorization than for valorizing the potential of different perspectives under the banner of methodological rigor. But what exactly does that mean?

As Elísio Macamo's PhD students, we faced questions of that kind on a regular basis, and in 2014, we organized a Q&A session to get a clearer understanding of Macamo's main lines of thinking. For Macamo, too, this was the first time to distil an overall approach from the multiplicity of themes and ideas that constitute his work: "I have never really sat down to think about what I'm doing and to sort out my own theoretical positions within sociology and African studies." Our recording and transcript of the conversation accordingly spurred great interest amongst our colleagues, which eventually led to the idea to share excerpts with a broader public. The goal here is twofold: one is to circulate Macamo's intriguing proposition to sever the task of scholarship from the "problems" that Africa tends to be narrowed down to, to strive for methodological consistency rather than what one believes to be normative validity, and to prioritize the process of scholarship over its conclusions in order to open up new intellectual spaces and perspectives. The second purpose of this publication is to situate Macamo's thinking along interstices of theory and history, to chronicle the encounters between Macamo's biography, political history, and academic institutions and illustrate what these encounters produce.

The questions, collected from fellow PhD students, are ordered into three categories: *Positions on Theory*, *Personal Positioning as an Academic*, and *African Studies*.[1] While there are multiple overlaps between these three blocks, they do feature specific interests. The "theory" block inquires into how Macamo conceptualizes his overall scientific approach, and into PhD studenťs' more specific theoretical concerns: how he relates to positivism, what he means by "colonizing technology", and how he thinks about "critical whiteness" approaches and Eurocentrism. In the second section, Macamo shares a personal, if not intimate account of his experiences as an African scholar in European academia and as a public intellectual in Mozambique. The balancing act and the "face-work" (Goffman 1955) that these positions require are the backdrop against which his critique of

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[1] Originally, the third block was titled "The Center for African Studies Basel (CASB) and its PhD Students"; here, we highlight Macamo's more general perspectives on African Studies and omit the more CASB-specific discussion.

normative reasoning in the social sciences becomes legible. The final section concerns the discipline of African studies. We PhD students wanted to know, for example, what skills we bring to the job market outside of academia, and in the eyes of our supervisor, we are well-equipped as problem creators ("Industry appreciates that!"). Such skeptical council permeates Elísio Macamo's responses, which are refreshing on many levels: as an inspiring narrative of intellectual becoming, but also as a provocative call to revise the way we approach scholarship in the social sciences and in African studies.

POSITIONS ON THEORY

Good morning. Thanks for taking your time for this Q&A session. Let us start with what may be the overarching question: What do you see as the core ideas of your work, Elísio? Where would you position yourself theoretically?

This is a very difficult question because unlike other colleagues and friends of mine I tend to have too many topics. I have worked on a lot of things, religion for example or what you can call the Sociology of Knowledge. African Philosophy has also been a matter of concern to me, but I have also looked at development policy, at disasters, risk and to some extent at youth. In the past few years, my interests have moved towards technology. I don't think it is common to address so many topics; people tend to focus on one or two subjects and build their careers on that. Now, I think that might explain something about, perhaps not the core ideas of my work but how I approach sociology and the social sciences and African studies in general. My main concern is to find ways to reflect about how to produce knowledge about whatever interests me. That's the key thing I'm concerned with. My work has been a constant search for that and I have to admit that I have not yet found the solution. You could say it's philosophical, it's epistemological, because it's really about theories of knowledge.
But maybe that's too abstract. In fact, I have placed a lot of importance on methodology, and since I came to Basel I have spent most of my time reflecting on methodology. My concern, if you like, is how knowledge about anything is possible: how is knowledge about Africa possible and what does

it look like really, when I have it? How do I know I have it? What is it? These are the questions I ask when I comment on any piece of work that comes my way. I don't have a particular commitment to any particular theoretical framework, because theoretical commitments can act as prisons. You decide, for example, that you take a Political Economy perspective and then you become hostage to it, which I don't think is useful. Having said that, I do have theoretical preferences. I do like Weber for instance, his concern with understanding, with inductive processes. This is why I like social constructivism, even though I don't go all the way with it. But there are also certain approaches within Marxism, within Political Economy that I find interesting and that I can work with. And many other things… My point, therefore, is that theoretical commitments are less exciting than a clear commitment to methodology. I am more interested in understanding what makes a claim legitimate than how I can make legitimate claims within a certain framework.

Whom would you then name as the three to four best and worst social theorists/African studies scholars?

I cannot do this, I cannot say "Look, these are the three best and these are the three worst scholars", because the same people who can fascinate me in one book will horrify me in the next book. So, it's mainly about books, whether a book is well written or not. What brought me to the field of African studies really were a few books in the 1980s when I was still a student in England. One book was by a historian and the other book was by a social anthropologist. The historian is J. B. Peires (1989) from south africa who wrote a wonderful history of the great Xhosa cattle killing movement in the 19th century, this collective suicide which is well-known in the field of history and also in anthropology. He wrote in a very nice style and he brought the characters and everything alive to me. What fascinated me most was his ability to convey that there is something wrong with the way we look at things. His book was a profound engagement with the notion "cargo cults" by showing that it entails complex issues which are not immediately obvious. The world is too complex; it is much more complex than our concepts. Our concepts tend to simplify the world in a highly problematic manner. This book was really an inspiration. The second book was by a social anthropologist, Adam Kuper, "The Invention of Primitive Society"

(1988). I think this is a book that everybody should read. It was refreshing because he took up the notion of invention which was made popular by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger ("The Invention of Tradition", 1983), but used it in a much more sophisticated manner. It is a wonderful intellectual history of social anthropology, focusing on the transformation of an idea. Through this book I discovered approaches to Africa as an object of knowledge. At the end of the 1980s, I read two other African scholars that I have found exiting. Valentin Mudimbe's "The Invention of Africa" (1988) was crucial for my own intellectual development. It was at a time when everybody was fascinated by Foucauldian approaches and that book is Foucauldian. What I found nice about the book was the intellectual depth, how profound the thinking was. I have to admit that I was surprised that an African could be so profound and I wanted to be like him. I have to admit that. Following that, I read Kwame Anthony Appiah's "In My Father's House" (1993). This is also a profound piece of work and he writes so well! As I moved on, I read Kwasi Wiredu, who is still my favorite African philosopher, "Philosophy and an African Culture" (1980) – a wonderful, wonderful book, and Joel Migdal's "Strong Societies and Weak States" (1988), which I think is one of the best books in political science about politics in Africa. I wish a lot of people who talk about failed states and weak states and so on would read it.

Well, I will not mention the worst books because we are recording this. I think my notion of worst books does not do justice to the books really. It is influenced by how well they have been received. It's not that the books are bad. I just think some of them don't deserve the kind of attention they have had.

You often emphasize the importance of descriptive methods in the social sciences, prioritizing the "How" over the "Why". Should social sciences enquire into causalities at all? And if so, how?

I think science is not possible without causalities. The question of science is often "Why?", which is also the question of everyday life. "Why?", this is what we ask all the time. Most of our arguments are really about why. We are trying to answer those questions. Science cannot be different from that. To expect science not to address that question is naïve. But there is a debate going on – ever since science became a legitimate pursuit – about the extent

to which the search for causalities is appropriate to certain forms of science. So, are enquires into causality appropriate for the social sciences? There are a lot of good arguments against it, just as there are good arguments in favor of that. I don't think that it's possible to settle those questions once and for all. I think for certain things you need to ask that question; for other things that question is not appropriate. In most cases, we are more concerned with the "How?" question, more concerned with description. The strength of the social sciences really is description, which is why I think that qualitative analysis is crucial: it is about breaking down the phenomena into their constituent parts. That's not causal, it's descriptive and therefore, analytical in a deep sense.

There is one problem here, however. Like I said in the beginning, we always ask "Why?" in our daily lives and people expect scientists to answer that question. There is this kind of psychological pressure on us to address that question in our research, even when our research does not warrant it. Unfortunately, we don't have enough courage to admit that we are not going to be able to answer that question, that we are aiming for descriptions of a particular phenomenon. Perhaps this has something to do with our fear of being inconclusive. We think that we always have to draw conclusions. Honestly, I wish I could convince more people that I would be happy with any piece of work that skips the conclusion. Just forget it. I think that might be a useful exercise. The urge to produce a conclusion leads us astray in logical terms, and logic is so essential. It makes us hostage to confirmation bias by fostering in us the idea that research needs to end with a neat account of something. Since that is not always the case, we end up cooking up stories. A good piece of academic work, as far as I am concerned, is one that spells out the conditions under which any given claim can be considered true, valid or convincing. When I claim that corruption is bad for development I don't commit myself to showing the reason why corruption is bad for development; I commit myself to spelling out the circumstances under which that particular claim is true, not the phenomenon itself. Unfortunately, we underestimate the extent to which much of what we do in research is engaging in discussions about when claims are valid. This does not mean that reality doesn't matter. It does. In the case of corruption, for example, spelling out the conditions under which the claim that corruption is bad for development is true is important because we know

that some forms of corruption have been good for development in certain countries, including most certainly all developed countries in the world.

Related to the previous methodological question, and maybe more specifically: What is your take on positivism and Karl Popper's theory of science?

There is a piece of personal biography in this, Karl Popper is part of my life, as it were. I grew up in a country that adopted Marxism as its political philosophy. So from the time when I was ten years old, when Mozambique became independent, it was ruled by people who believed themselves to be Marxists. Of course, I found that normal and I found that good, especially because what they committed themselves to sounded great. And I also profited from it: education was made free and so my parents could afford sending all of us to school and all my five brothers and sisters could get an education. That was attractive in a way. But there were also things which were highly problematic, especially the limitations of personal freedoms. I always wanted to be a doctor, a medical doctor, but in those days in Mozambique, you didn't choose what you wanted to study. At the end of high school, somebody at a ministry would look at your marks and say ok, this one here can go and study this. I was sent to study languages instead of being sent to medical school. I found those practices highly problematic. When I started reading Marxism, I grew dissatisfied with it, but I didn't have the intellectual tools to challenge it. We used to have political education at school, that's what it was called. Funnily enough we didn't have Russian or East-German teachers for those classes. The people who taught us Marxism at school were mainly Western Europeans: left-wing young people who were committed to revolution in the world. One of the teachers who taught us Marxism was from Sweden; most of us hated that lesson because we didn't see the point of it. We didn't want to be taught this stuff, but we had to sit through it. At least we could make sure that he didn't do his job. So I decided to disturb those lessons. I would bombard this guy with questions. At first he thought that this showed interest on my part. But, you know, he could never teach his stuff, because he was busy answering my questions. And so I became sort of a hero for preventing him from indoctrinating us.

That exercise made me aware of some things that I hadn't been able to understand; why Marxism could sound so great on paper and in practice there were so many problems. When I went to England to study, with a scholarship from the British Council, I had access to a lot of books. One of those books changed my outlook: Karl Popper's two volumes on "The Open Society and its Enemies" (1945). I was just fascinated. During my MA studies in Sociology in London most of my lecturers were liberal left-wing people who had a lot of ideological problems with Karl Popper, because Karl Popper had heavily criticized Marxism. Also, Popper had become popular with conservatives, especially in Britain, because he was quoted in the same breath with people like Friedrich von Hayek, Milton Friedman and so on – and became anathema to a lot of people. My lecturers couldn't understand my fascination with Karl Popper. But I found him fascinating because he gave me the intellectual tools which I was lacking to make sense of my own problems with what was going on in my country. His falsificationism is really his political theory. He criticized Marxism on the ground that it is totalitarian, the belief in the possibility to predict the future and the idea that people can be convinced to move in that direction. This is what accounts for much of the terror that took place in these societies: people who were convinced that they were in possession of the truth. Falsification is exactly about that. Popper warns us that we can never be sure and we therefore always need to try and falsify our theories. I found that appealing, although of course there are problems with falsificationism itself, and with his understanding of the social sciences as quasi-sciences, as not having robust ways of falsifying their theses, and thus lagging behind the natural sciences. What you will find if you read him carefully though, is actually political criticism. Recently, Popper has become popular again and taken up by scholars who are looking at uncertainty, which has become an issue in Western society today. Popper's approach is the most appropriate to account for that. Because of my interest in risk and uncertainty I find it nice that I can now go back to Popper again.

What do you mean by "colonizing technology" and what is "technology" for you?

I keep saying that I'm interested in technology and technology in everyday life, but I never spell that out. This is a serious problem for me, because

there are a lot of people looking at technology nowadays, in science and technology studies for instance, and I find this work very interesting but it's not quite the approach I want to take. I will explain this by giving you a brief account of Norbert Elias's work on the civilizing process. What he means by the "The Civilizing Process" (1939) is how we come to gain control over ourselves. He talks about the development of table manners, for example, how we control our sexual appetite, behavior in public and so on. He says that such self-control went hand in hand with the development of the ability of the state to organize society – the control of violence that made civility possible, so that people solve a lot of problems of social relationships actually through self-control. Norbert Elias accounts for that, citing three forms of control: the control over nature, control over social relations, and control over self. Now, we have grown accustomed to the idea that technology is something material. But I think Elias is really talking about technology: all these things which we use in order to achieve control over ourselves and over social relationships are technologies. He also says that the ability to control nature has grown considerably and that there are no limits to that. Even control over social relations has grown considerably – look at the security apparatus and welfare. But control over self is something that cannot grow infinitely. There is always the possibility of regressing, of "de-civilization" like we see nowadays in European societies and how they respond to people in search of protection: instead of living up to their own values of humanism and solidarity, they turn refugees into a problem. But Elias didn't work this out. He reflected on this and then stopped.

So, I'm using the notion of technology in the sense of control over nature: the material means that we use to control nature. But I'm also saying that the development of those means to control nature depend on the other two forms of control – more or less in Donna Haraway's (1987) sense of cyborgs or even Bruno Latour's actants (1987), that you have this interpenetration of the material, the natural, and the social. I am reluctant however to use their terminology because I think they miss something there. What I see in Elias's work, is that in any social situation many things can happen, but they don't. At the end of our session here, for example, we will go back to our desks and so on. But Julia (Büchele) could start dancing, right (laughs)? I don't know, Waltz or something else. There are so many more things that could happen, but they don't. In African studies we are not sufficiently aware of

the many alternative possibilities out there. This is what I'm trying to understand with the notion of technology: what are all those things that could have happened and are not happening? Or maybe they are happening but we are not capturing them with our terminology? For instance, how people deal with technology in African urban settings is much more complex than our accounts of it. We end up reducing what we see to our conceptual categories. We say: "Ok, this is a tension between tradition and modernity", "it's appropriation", or whatever. All those other things that are going on there, that are intimated in those situations – that's the word Zygmunt Baumann (1991) uses – are overlooked. It's not quite in line with Latour or Donna Haraway, it's really something else that I'm trying to find out. When I was still in Bayreuth, and up to now whenever I meet my former boss and mentor there, Dieter Neubert, I like to think that it is part of a concern with the notion of modernity, which it certainly is, but there's more to it and I'm still searching.

What do you think of critical whiteness approaches?

So, critical whiteness… To be honest, it's something that has never interested me. Basically, I have a problem with anything that has to do with racism as a legitimate subject of study, because it has so much potential for leading us astray. Maybe I'm wrong here and it's a political statement I'm making, but in my view you should call things by their names: there is no such thing as racism, there is only stupidity. You are either stupid or not, but you are not racist. The label racism tends to give legitimacy to stupidity. I think critical whiteness is definitely good and interesting for the people who do it but it's not my cup of tea. I have been invited to contribute to books on critical whiteness, but I distance myself from the notion itself. Having said this, I must mention one notion from that scholarly field which I find fascinating as a concept. It's Gloria Wekker's notion of "White Innocence" (2016). Now this is science at its best: Gloria Wekker draws on Edward Said's idea of a cultural archive which both underwrites a very specific form of knowledge and serves as a structure of attitudes and references. Wekker tries to explain how a particular society or culture could come to think of itself as having been endowed with a particular right to tell others what to do, while at the same time reserving the right to be offended if the way it discharges that right is not perceived by the others as

benevolent. This is a terrific notion that can be applied elsewhere, for example in development policy. So, I'm all for scholarship that yields useful theoretical generalisations that can be applied broadly, but not so much for insights that merely help us to be critical of something we abhor. I think there is a connection between this question and the following one about Eurocentrism.

Do you think that the development narrative or discourse is (still) Eurocentric?

Eurocentrism is an interesting notion, but I think it would be better to use the more neutral notion *ethnocentrism*. Because this is the problem that we face: ethnocentrism. It can happen in Europe, it can happen in Africa, it can happen everywhere. As far as the development narrative and discourse are concerned, I don't think that they are Eurocentric. It's not only Europeans promoting that, there are Africans promoting that model as well. There are interesting questions that we may miss if we focus our attention only on Eurocentrism. There are questions about history, historiography. How do we understand history? Do we understand European history or Western history well enough? I don't think so. In fact, I would even claim that a lot of people who work in development would profit a lot from learning about history here in Europe. A lot of people just imagine and produce a version of European history that suits the development discourse which is not necessarily what actually happened. If you say Eurocentric you miss that point. Having said that, I still think it necessary to point out that unlike most people, I don't think that Africa can learn from European history how to develop itself. That's a misgiving. The only valid lesson we can draw from European history is how to keep an advantage when you have it, not how to acquire it, but that's another issue…

PERSONAL POSITION AS AN ACADEMIC

One of the things that struck me in your earlier response with regard to Mudimbe was when you said that you were startled that an African could be so profound. And I don't know whether you meant it ironically, but maybe you can elaborate on that and how you position yourself as an African researcher in African studies based in Europe.

I meant it seriously. You see, if you grow up like most of us did, you come to think very negatively of yourself. It comes naturally, when all your references at school are foreign, when anything that matters comes from abroad. You do develop that and I have no problem admitting that. It has been a very hard learning process to learn to believe in myself. This is one thing that we have to do as African scholars. That's an additional task that you have – to learn to believe in yourself and to learn to think that, if you make an effort you can be as profound as other people. You start looking for role models and when you find them you are very, very happy. This is what happened to me when I read Mudimbe. It was not very original, I have to say. It was not very original, because he was basically doing the same thing that Edward Said (1978) did in his book "Orientalism" and what Walter Mignolo (2005) did later with regard to Latin America. Yet, he conveyed a sense of deep scholarship that fascinated me. In Germany, for many years when I went to give public talks, people would say to me: "If you speak like that, will people understand you in Africa?". At first, I took this question as a compliment but after a while I developed a hatred for that question. I started asking people: "Does every German understand Habermas?" – not that I see myself as some kind of "African" Habermas… So, you see, you are confronted with these situations.

I think my position as an African researcher in African studies is quite straightforward. The question would even be more interesting if you had asked me about my position as an African researcher in *scholarship* in Europe. Because you see, most of us who are African and work in Europe are working on our own countries, on our own continent. We are not acknowledged as people who can actually say anything useful about the countries in which we live. I had this experience working at an institution in Berlin, where most of the people saw me as an anthropologist. They had read my CV, they knew what I had done, but they saw me as an

anthropologist. I'm not saying this to demean anthropology, I'm just saying it says something about how you are looked at: I am there to represent, if you like, my culture. It has been a very difficult struggle, an uphill struggle to get recognition as a sociologist, as a scholar, not as an Africanist. I got that recognition, first of all, at the University of Bayreuth. I have to say that I was also very happy when I came to Basel, because unlike in Germany, where the probability of being accepted as a sociologist is much lower, here in Basel, the colleagues immediately accepted me as a sociologist. Of course, I'm pushed in the direction of African studies because that's also my field, but what I try to bring into African studies is scholarship. That we have to get recognition on the basis of scholarship – which is why I have this focus on methodology. I insist on that. But it's not easy.

The other challenge I have is my relationship with Africa and other African scholars. Owing to my privileged position here, I have access to books and conferences and better possibilities of traveling than most African scholars. These visa regulations are killing scholarship in Africa because it's such a big handicap that people in Africa have to plan maybe one year in advance to go and attend a conference in Europe. These obstacles to scholarship change your relationship to your colleagues in Africa. They may see you as privileged, or as successful only because you sell an image of Africa that Europeans want, an image that they assume to be detached from African realities because you don't live there, so you cannot know it. I try to make the point that we can sort that out methodologically because being in Africa is no guarantee that you will see African realities and that you will see them right.

You are pushed in all directions. Of course, I also complained about not being seen as a scholar in my own right, but as a speaker of a continent – which has advantages and disadvantages. One advantage is of course that you get invited to all sorts of things because people want to have an African there. When that African is articulate, even better. So I get invited to all sorts of things, some *Evangelische Akademie* somewhere with all that rosebud tea, they are doing something on development, they invite you. Some university doing something on whatever, they invite you. And on all sorts of topics. Tomorrow I will be doing a radio discussion on Ebola. I don't have a clue about anything but (laughing) you know, next week I'm doing something on Albert Schweitzer on television. I have no clue about Albert Schweitzer. I gave them the names of people who really worked on Albert Schweitzer,

but these people are not African or, if they are, they don't speak German. So they want an African who speaks German and I go there. I have become a professional African (laughs). And then you don't know how your German and Swiss colleagues react to such public exposure. Some of them might think it's really not justified, because you are not saying interesting things and yet you get all that attention. It can create unnecessary tensions with your colleagues. It's a very difficult situation. It's not just sitting down here and working on Africa. It's actually negotiating all those things.

It's interesting because when we were talking about your personal positioning, our feeling was that you play with it and that it comes extremely natural to you to do these kinds of identity plays. But you say it's a lot of work.

It is. I'm doing face work, it's Goffman (1955). You've got this foreground, but what you don't see is what goes on backstage. Of course sometimes things misfire: I may misjudge an audience and I say something which is not what they expected. It's not easy. Even refusing an engagement is a lot of work because some people think that I have a responsibility towards Africa. I have to go and do that. Otherwise, it seems that simply because I'm well off here I'm forgetting my responsibility towards the continent. So I have to try and tell these people that I have my own life, and that Africa is not a burden I'm carrying.

How do you reconcile your non-normative approach to social science with your normative viewpoints? For example, when you write on Facebook about Mozambique and politics, do you write in a normative way? And what do people in Mozambique expect from you as a scholar and how do you deal with these expectations?

I do insist on the need to avoid normativity. But this is to say that I'm aware of how important normativity is. To a certain extent, you could even say the argument against normativity is normative. The basic point here is about objectivity: Is this something which we should strive for or not? If it is, as I think it is, then how can we engage with normativity from that point of view? What I keep insisting on is that we should look for a language that will enable us to engage in a conversation even though we have different

ideological and ethical view-points. I think that's possible. We are doing it already, we do it all the time and we understand each other. The question may not be about whether or not it's normative or non-normative but really to what extent it is possible for us in the social sciences, for us in African studies, to continue deepening our commitment to objectivity because that is what makes science possible. That's the discussion and that's actually the backbone of my political engagement in Mozambique also.

You see I was privileged enough to have been the person who trained the first sociologists in Mozambique. Most of them were trained by me. So I developed a commitment to them and to Sociology in Mozambique. I have always felt the importance of being there with them, helping them to make Sociology relevant. I tried to define Sociology in Mozambique by arguing that it is about being a good citizen. A good citizen is one who is competent in public debate, and competence in public debate is the ability to be objective or to strive for objectivity. So my whole participation in public debate in Mozambique has been geared towards making this point again and again and again. I started with writing to a daily newspaper. I wrote about political issues, development issues, but I always tried to privilege a sociological perspective. And people appreciated that, especially the students, and I like to think that it changed the way in which some intellectuals in Mozambique started speaking to the public. Before that, my impression was that you participated in public debate to show people that you are an intellectual, by writing things that nobody understands, by showing your erudition, by citing, quoting scholars, and so on. I changed that because I made it simple, I drew a lot from my own knowledge of my own culture. For instance, I have a little column in a magazine where I reflect on idiomatic expressions in my language. Again, that's something that was unheard of in Mozambique because an intellectual does not want to admit that he speaks his own mother tongue. So here is one sociologist who lives abroad and still knows his own mother tongue. The former Portuguese colonies have particular difficulties to relate to their own mother tongues: people who speak the same African language would not speak that language when they meet, they would speak Portuguese, really. So in that magazine I reflect on these expressions and people love it. It's amazing. One day I was coming out of a parking space at Maputo's central market and I was paying. The guy who was sitting there said to me: "I know you." And I said "I'm sorry, I don't know you." He said: "No, no, you write for that

magazine!" And then he started commenting on an expression that I had analyzed and I thought "Wow, this is wonderful." Or I go to the barber shop. I get there, I always go to the same one, I get there and then these people start suggesting expressions to me (laughing): "Ok there is also this one, there is also this one, and there is also this one." It's really amazing. That's something I love. The basic point is that what I have been trying to do is to say to people: look, we can become better citizens and that's maybe the challenge that we are facing in Mozambique, being better citizens. If we could sort that out, we would sort out a lot of other problems that we have. It's not an easy discussion. At the beginning a lot of people thought that I wanted a ministerial position because I wrote things that came across as defending government positions. You see, my aim was not to criticize those in power, because that's very easy and everybody is doing that – for example to say that things are not running well because of corruption. Everybody understands and agrees with it, right? But to show people that there are shortcomings in that account is much more difficult. That's what I do. I was often accused of just wanting to become a minister. Several years ago, before I came to Basel, I was asked to become the rector of a public university. In Mozambique, university rectors for public universities are appointed by the Head of State, which is something I don't agree with, I think they should be appointed by the people who work at the university. I declined. I also declined because I didn't have the necessary experience as an assistant in Bayreuth at the time and because I had never worked at that university in Mozambique. What would it be like to work there, with people who actually thought that they should be the rectors? You know a university rector in Mozambique has the rank of a minister, you get a Mercedes Benz, you get a body guard – which also means you cannot misbehave (laughing). So I refused and I never made that public. I told my brothers and sisters, but they kept it to themselves. So, every time somebody came up saying "Oh, he just wants to be a minister", and so on, it was painful. So, in short, my political engagement in Mozambique started with newspapers, then I had a blog for sociologists in Mozambique – a very nice blog with all kinds of people and blog posts on methodology and theory, which I stopped when it became too political, with people coming in to have political discussions that I didn't want to have. When I settled in Basel, I joined Facebook. There are really wonderful discussions and I like it for the effect it has on the quality of public debate. It also helps me to

improve my thinking, definitely. Though of course, Facebook can be very time-consuming (laughs). It is.

AFRICAN STUDIES

What is your vision of African studies as a discipline? What would you advice scholars to focus on, on a most general level?

As I said, I am committed to a vision of African studies that is based on scholarship. What that means in practice is difficult to spell out. My point is that, while we are doing research on Africa, we often forget to relate our findings back to our respective disciplines, to debates in sociology or anthropology or history or whatever else. We are too concerned with Africa and we forget disciplined scholarship. We need to try and break free from this uncomfortable embrace of Africa. Part of it is methodological, to not let ourselves be caught in our own very restricted area, but to do more serious conceptual work and relate it to more general realities. What can you say, for instance, about the study of youth in Germany based on what you are doing in Africa? What can you say about youth as a conceptual category, migrant as a conceptual category? I think we should engage in that kind of discussion, and we should ask, methodologically, how to translate. Conceptual research is translation: you are trying to spell out the meaning of a concept against the background of reality. How does that happen? How is that done? What methods are implied? This is the kind of research agenda that I think the Centre for African Studies in Basel should have.

I have been trying to do something like that. Not in a systematic way, but here and there I have tried. One study for example that I did in Bayreuth was on the social institution of coffee and cake – this coffee and cake that Germans themselves claim cannot be translated into any other language because it's *Kaffee und Kuchen*. It's very important in Bavaria, especially in Franconia, where I was, and Bayreuth has the biggest concentration of china factories for making tea sets and coffee sets and so on – it's worth billions of Euros. And what they do is fascinating, because they guarantee that if you buy a certain model there, even after 30 years, you can still get a replacement for it in case you break something. A lot of young girls, for their first big religious ritual – communion, confirmation and so on – they

would get a tea set as a present. From that moment onwards, they will build it. They would buy the coffee pot, and then they will buy the plates, and then they will work on that until they marry, to then force it on their husbands (laughs). Part of being a competent husband is to know that you have to help your woman complete the set. It's a wonderful social phenomenon! I even published a short paper on that. It was important because it showed me that there is a big problem with this dichotomy between tradition and modernity, a huge problem, because in a way, tradition is not only very important in Germany, but more importantly the guarantee of modernity. So the title of that article was "Die Begehung der Kontinuität" (Macamo 2010b), you know *Begehung* is like inauguration, but it is also a celebration. So it's the celebration of continuity. What all these rituals do – birthdays, which are also very important - what they do is that they ensure continuity. My point was that I don't see that kind of continuity in Africa. I don't see it. My whole experience as an African was one of discontinuity! And so actually the most traditional people on earth are the modern people (laughing), that was the claim, which unfortunately was lost on a lot of people who read the article.[2]

What advice would you give to students interested in careers outside of academia, including jobs in development? What skills and what expertise do you think we offer non-academic employers, based on our training?

I think that things have become much better for social scientists because we live in economies that need people who know how to process information and people who have the ability to identify and formulate problems. I think those are the strengths of the social sciences. Unfortunately, we have wasted a lot of our time trying to think of the social sciences as problem solvers. They are not! They are problem creators. Industry appreciates that. Those people in the industry who don't appreciate it, well, they have to be made to appreciate that (laughs) and that's your job.

Now the development industry would be harder to convince because their whole discourse is based on the idea that you want to solve problems. They are not aware of the fact that their problem is that they have too many

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[2] Macamo talks about these issues in more detail in a recent article entitled "Before we Start" (Macamo 2016b). The main point here is that studying Africa is to study the way we study Africa, i.e. a Sociology of Knowledge concerning scholarship on Africa.

answers, for which often they don't have a question. To convince them that their problems are only a function of their solutions is very hard, but that's what you have to do. Beyond that, I think that if you go into development you have to be ready, and this is psychological, to accept that you are participating in a massive delusion. That's hard if you are a good scholar but you can take it lightly, which is how I try to see it. I've come to believe that development is just a delusion. You convince yourself that you are doing something nice, right? And then, what you have to do is not only impression management, to use Goffman's language again, but also to sustain that sense of reality and urgency, the idea that there is a serious problem in the world and that you are addressing that problem. That sense of urgency is part of the game. So it's a very cynical view I have. But that's the problem that I would personally have if I were in development – but then again, even university life is a massive delusion.

That would have been my question (laughs): how would the delusion in development be different from that in academia?

Yeah, there is no big difference. I mean this ritual here, we are all pretending we are talking serious stuff (laughs), right?

On the other hand, now that you have been so cynical, do you think there is any area that we could work in or any area in life that is not delusional?

No, there isn't (laughs), but some areas are more delusional than others!

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