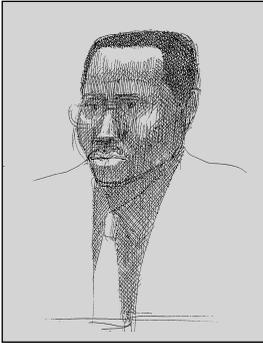


Elísio Salvado Macamo

## African Work and a Painful Farewell



I was born on 21<sup>st</sup> December 1964 in the small town of Xai-Xai in southern Mozambique. I studied sociology at the University of North London, where I received my M. A. in Sociology and Social Policy in 1992. I defended my Ph.D. dissertation on “Über den Zusammenhang von Afrikanistik, Moderne und Antimoderne – Versuch einer Kultursoziologie der Bedeutung der Moderne in Afrika” at the University of Bayreuth in 1997 (published as *Was ist Afrika? – Zur Geschichte und Kultursoziologie eines modernen Konstrukts*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1999). From 1997 until 1999, I was a post-doctoral researcher at the Institute for African Studies of the University of Bayreuth and carried out research on the influence of a Protestant mission on the work ethic in southern Mozambique. I spent half a year as a research fellow at the Centre for African Studies at ISCTE, Lisbon, before becoming an AGORA-Fellow in October 1999. Currently I am an assistant professor at the department of development sociology at Bayreuth University, where I am researching local interpretations, prevention and mastering of disaster in Africa. – Address: Lehrstuhl für Entwicklungssoziologie, Universität Bayreuth, Hugo-Rüdel-Str. 10, 95440 Bayreuth.

My initial contact with the Wissenschaftskolleg was just as surreal as the year has been. I was conducting field research in rural Mozambique on the influence of a Swiss Protestant mission on the work ethic of its African converts. I had taken time out from the field to give a talk at a university in the capital city, Maputo, when I was surprised by a phone call from my wife in Germany, who told me a letter signed by Wolf Lepenies, Jürgen Kocka, Yehuda Elkana and Rüdiger Wehner had arrived. It was an invitation to a meeting at the Wissenschaftskolleg. And it was on April 1<sup>st</sup>! Since this telephone call was slightly before the deregulation of the telecommunications market in Germany, I took the cost of an overseas call as a validating premise for my all-too-eager readiness to believe in the existence of the letter.

The subsequent months, prior to being invited as an AGORA-Fellow to the Wissenschaftskolleg, turned out to be quite an enriching experience. One factor that contributed to this was the initial lack of clarity regarding the project itself. While the Permanent Fellows leading the whole enterprise had been careful to set out the themes – *Arbeit, Wissen, Bindung* – before convening the meetings, they did this by producing a catalogue of questions. In the meetings that soon followed in quick succession, each one of us was encouraged to rethink his own material in the light of the catalogue, thereby generating new questions, new avenues and common strands. This processual manner has been characteristic of the way AGORA has functioned; and fortunately so, as I feel inclined to add, for, given the different disciplines and theoretical perspectives represented in the group, any other approach would have stifled communication.

Once I was more or less sure I knew what AGORA was about, I decided to contribute with a reflection on the relationship between work and societal organisation in Africa. There used to be a time when the relationship between work and Africa was not obvious, but thanks to a more sophisticated definition of the concept of work – which in recent German anthropology has found its most outspoken advocates at Bayreuth University – I did not feel like I had to take up those old issues. Indeed, encouraged by this new anthropology, I thought it more useful to follow a well-beaten path in sociology, which consists in articulating social facts/action with society at large. My theoretical interest was in the possibility of reading society through notions and practices of work.

I came to the Wissenschaftskolleg with the idea of doing this with particular reference to Max Weber's definition of social relations. Not only did this reverential bow to a sociological classic who had inspired my previous work on the Protestant mission in Mozambique seem sensible, but I also felt that there was a lot to be gained analytically from conceptualising work as a social relation. For a start, work is action in the socially meaningful way in which Weber grounds his sociology. Work as social action lends itself to all sorts of sociological transformations in accordance with Weber's action types. This, I believe, reduces its complexity to manageable proportions. Second, if a social relation is a category of social action, then it seems to me that, to the extent that work involves cooperation or conflict, it is also a social relation in a very basic sense. This too, I believe, renders work as a conceptual category in sociology even less complex.

Armed with these rudimentary ideas, I came to the AGORA project of the Wissenschaftskolleg bent on exploring the analytical implications of conceptualising work in Weberian terms. I was particularly interested in the distinction Weber made between social relations that can go the way of "Vergemeinschaftung" and those that go the way of "Vergesellschaftung".

tung". Given that this distinction appeared to me less normative than Durkheim's dichotomy between mechanical versus organic solidarity, I thought it offered me a useful framework to discuss the ambivalent impact of modernity on African societies. My material on the influence of the Protestant mission on the work ethic in southern Mozambique seemed to suggest a tension between the spread of what, for simplicity's sake, and following Weber and Wolfgang Schluchter, I call "methodic way of life" and the continued resilience of traditional forms of association. Indeed, the evidence appeared to show that the Protestant ethic had been adopted on local terms. People looked for and embraced the new opportunities colonialism and Christianity offered to lead a life largely consistent with the values claimed by Protestantism as its own, and yet they went on organizing their social relationships in terms that betrayed a lack of confidence in the superiority of organic forms of solidarity.

In the months I spent at the Wissenschaftskolleg, I came to think of this tension more in terms of how Christianity had actually been used by Africans as a resource in their attempts at coping with social change against the background of a rather precarious existence. Two factors were instrumental in bringing me to this line of thought. One was the general consensus within the AGORA group concerning the analytical usefulness of looking at the history of colonialism not only as one of European expansion and conquest, but also as an entangled one, involving a high degree of hybridity and mutual influences. The other factor was the attempt that some of my AGORA colleagues working on work and I embarked upon. We tried to develop an analytical framework within which to make sense of modern work. We placed a lot of emphasis on codified work, which directly led me to look more closely at Portuguese attempts to introduce modern forms of work organisation in Mozambique towards the end of the nineteenth century. Both factors allowed me to appreciate more fully the role of work in the organisation of society and how misleading approaches can be that seek to account for work in terms of cultural essences and not in terms of historical process.

My year at the Wissenschaftskolleg was one full of ironies. Given the traditional view on the relationship between Africans and work, I always found it amusing to be working on work in Africa. This always kept me in high spirits. Doing that work in Germany was another source of pleasure. Even more ironical, though, was the whole context. The Wissenschaftskolleg rightly prides itself on being an institution that creates an environment that allows Fellows to work in comfort. Work at the Institute becomes a pleasurable activity. And yet, having to peruse Swiss missionary diaries and reports containing accounts of how hard and painful work under the blazing hot sun of southern Mozambique was conducive to

salvation, I always felt rather ashamed that my way there was paved by the efficient bureaucracy of the Institute. Not that I would have preferred otherwise.

Another irony had a professional character. I came to the Wissenschaftskolleg as part of a project that also wanted to give younger scholars a chance to improve intellectually. The Institute's name, however, carries so much prestige that in the public imagination any Fellow is just as bright as is to be expected. I learned, therefore, to listen and to think carefully before I uttered any word, for I was constantly aware of the high expectations surrounding my status as a Fellow. This was perhaps the most rewarding intellectual experience I had in my Fellowship year. Needless to say, I profited enormously from conversations with older and more established colleagues and from exchanges with my fellow AGORA-Fellows and their fascination with new ideas and theoretical perspectives.

All that I can say by way of a conclusion is that the year at the Wissenschaftskolleg was an intellectual, personal and social gift. It is amazing how one can get used to people to the extent where saying farewell becomes painful. Perhaps, if I may make suggestions for the future, there should be no "Abschiedsfest", for festivities sometimes lower the threshold for misunderstandings that can hardly be repaired at such a late stage and, at any rate, one never really takes leave of the Wissenschaftskolleg. Once a Fellow, always a Fellow; and this is a tribute to the sense of community that the Institute and its diligent staff are able to foster.