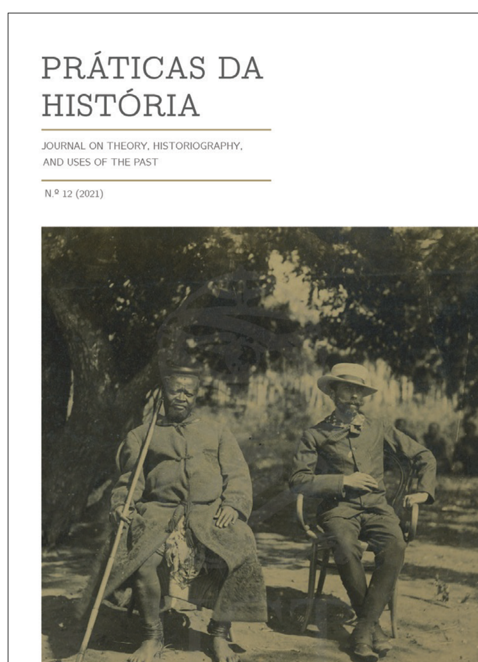

On lives, politics and history

A conversation with Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara S. Isaacman about activism, Mozambique and other African histories

Diogo Ramada Curto and Nuno Domingos

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On lives, politics and history

A conversation with Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara S. Isaacman about activism, Mozambique and other African histories by Diogo Ramada Curto and Nuno Domingos*

In late 2019, Allen and Barbara Isaacman were in Portugal to conduct research on Samora Machel – guerrilla fighter and first president of the People's Republic of Mozambique – which led to the book *Samora Machel. A life cut short*, published in 2020[1], which will be followed by another biography, more developed and academic in tone. During this research stay, they presented the Portuguese translation of their book about the Cahora Bassa dam[2]. Since the late 1960s, Allen and Barbara Isaacman have been working on what is now the territory of Mozambique, developing one of the most extensive and solid researches on the history of Africa. Their analyses focus on African political and social structures, the process of Portuguese colonial occupation, and how it affected the lives of African populations. In their books, archival knowledge and oral sources support a historiography concerned with the analysis of field processes, namely with the intention of bringing to the forefront the practices, expectations, and worldviews of the local populations.

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1 Allen F. Isaacman, Barbara Isaacman, *Mozambique's Samora Machel: A Life Cut Short* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2020).

2 Allen F. Isaacman, Barbara Isaacman, *Dams, Displacement, and the Delusion of Development. Cahora Bassa and its legacies in Mozambique, 1965-2007* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014) [trad. *A Ilusão do Desenvolvimento. Cahora Bassa e a História de Moçambique* (Lisboa: Outro Modo, 2019)].

The conversation took place on October 15-17, 2019, in the noble hall of the National Library of Portugal, whom we thank for hosting us, in the person of its director Inês Cordeiro. Over several hours of recording, we talked about their personal, academic and political path. The lessons we took away from this conversation are varied and bear upon Barbara and Allen Isaacman's generosity, ethical elevation, analytical rigor, and sense of solidarity with the Mozambican people.

The beginning: from New York to Mozambique

Diogo Ramada Curto (DRC): Let's begin with the fact that you are New Yorkers...

Allen F. Isaacman (AFI): We were both born in New York City, from a Jewish background. I was from the Bronx. She came from Long Island.

Barbara S. Isaacman (BSI): Well, no. I was born in Manhattan and then I lived in Queens, then the Bronx and Queens again. When I was eleven, we were living in middle-income housing and then my father started earning too much money, so we moved to the suburbs – Roslyn Heights on Long Island and that's where I lived from the time I was eleven until I went away to college.

AFI: The important thing is that we met when we were sixteen, in a place called Lake Mohegan.

BSI: No. Mohegan Colony, that's what it was called.

AFI: It was a left-wing community.

BSI: My grandmother had lived there and her next-door neighbor was a retired person who had been in the Communist Party and there was an enclave of people who were from the Communist Party and socialists. My grandmother was not. She just happened to live there.

AFI: That became a big influence. I came from a family was that not political, so Bobbie was very important in my political formation, as was this community.

BSI: When we met it was the time when the Civil Rights Movement was beginning in the United States and so there were sit-ins going on already in the South and groups invited people who were involved in the Southern Civil Rights Movement to tour progressive places in the North to raise money to help with their activities in the South. So, there were several groups of people that would come through where we were living and I was aware of all of those things and I took Allen along with me.

AFI: And then we became involved in the Civil Rights Movement. I went to City College in New York, which is located in Harlem. We were not affiliated with any party but we were part of the New Left. I used to spend a lot of time at a place called the African Nationalist Bookstore, where I became very interested in Africa. I also became involved in picketing as part of the Civil Rights movement. There was a national boycott and picketing of Woolworths, which was a department store chain that in the South didn't allow blacks to sit at the lunch counters. My father had a very small store called Hi-Jinx, on the other side of the street from Woolworths. I would go picket Woolworths and then, afterwards, go work in the family store. My father was angry with me because he would say "business and politics don't mix". I ignored him. At City College I actually wanted to study African American History. This was in 1963. I wanted to study African American History to go on to a PhD because I was very interested in the Civil Rights Movement. I knew, even then, that I couldn't be just an academic, and that I couldn't just be an activist. I wanted to mix the two but my Professors said that was impossible. They insisted there was no such field as African American History. Then it was called the History of the Negro People. They encouraged me to consider African history, that is, a new field that was just starting, called African History. By luck and good fortu-

ne, I was accepted at the University of Wisconsin which offered History of the World. It was among the best centers for the study of Africa in the United States.

DRC: [Jan] Vansina moved when?

BSI: Before 1964.

AFI: Jan Vansina was there. He came here about 1962. He came from the Belgian Congo and he developed all this methodology about oral history collection which influenced both of us. Because Bobbie and I both took courses with him. Bobbie then was studying –

BSI: At that time, I was probably studying Sociology. I was studying for my Ph.D. in Sociology and was going to write my dissertation on low-income migration in a section of Kampala, Uganda. Vansina taught in both the History Department and the Anthropology Department and I took his course in African Anthropology.

Int: So, you both applied in the same year to Wisconsin?

BSI: Yes, but I was not in African History. I had a bunch of different majors (laughs).

AFI: So, this was the time of the Anti-War Movement. We were very involved in the Anti-War Movement, Civil Rights Movement and the Anti-Apartheid Movement. Those were the three movements which motivated a lot of people in the New Left. I was looking to write a dissertation on something that would be intellectually interesting and also politically significant. And that's when I discovered, or focused on, Mozambique. That was the main reason. But the second reason was that almost nothing was written about Mozambique, and all the things that were written about Mozambique or Angola were about the Portuguese in Mozambique and Angola. The history of Africans, or in-

digenous people in Mozambique and Angola had not yet been written, at all. So, from an academic perspective, that was very large need and, from a political perspective, it satisfied a commitment that I felt very strongly. And, of course, as I began to read about Mozambique I began to read about the armed struggle and I was drawn more to Mozambique, although I wrote my master's thesis on Angola. I did an MA on Angola in 1966.

DRC: But you never published that?

AFI: No, it was never published, but interestingly enough, it was an economic history of Angola after the end of the Slave Trade. How did Angola, primarily the Portuguese in Angola, prosper, continue to function and make the colony pay for itself? It was through the rubber trade and ivory. So, that was what I wrote my master's thesis on.

DRC: So, this was precisely against Richard Hammond's thesis on uneconomic imperialism?

AFI: Right. That's exactly right.

Lisbon, 1966

AFI: Then, in 1966, we came here (to Lisbon).

BSI: We came to Lisbon for a *curso de férias* at the Universidade de Lisboa.

AFI: 1966, yes. We came here for the *curso de férias* at the Universidade de Lisboa to learn Portuguese. And, of course, we became acutely aware of the oppressive nature of the society in education, the emphasis on rote memory, and not thinking critically. In 1967 we came back.

BSI: In September.

AFI: I had a big fellowship funded by the Social Sciences Research Council.

BSI: The Ford Foundation.

AFI: Which got its money from the Ford Foundation and that was because the Ford Foundation was very interested in learning about Africa. The Ford Foundation had ties with the American government which was concerned with learning about Africa, particularly about Southern African. We came here and we met this other couple. Gerald "Jerry" Bender and his wife Tamara. We lived right near the American Embassy.

BSI: Right around the corner.

AFI: We had friends from Angola and Mozambique. They were anti--fascists but not necessarily pro-FRELIMO.

BSI: Like Luis Polanah.

AFI: Luis Polanah, the writer. Narana Coissoró, and also a priest who worked in Angola –

BSI: Padre Abílio. He was also a professor at someplace because he gave a lecture.

AFI: We also met the one family we thought were really very interesting. He came from Cape Verde. He was a writer. We had the good fortune to meet the family of São Tomé poet Francisco José Tenreiro from whom we learned a great deal about life in the colonies.

AFI: We became even more aware of how controlled Portuguese society was. Everyone said, be careful with the secret police, especially when you go to the cafes or taxi cabs. So, when we would get into a taxi cab,

we would always ask the driver in English, “Do you know what time it is?” and if they answered they knew, they were working for PIDE.

BSI: Or, if he looked at his watch then we knew he understood English and we wouldn’t say anything.

AFI: And we had a nickname for Salazar, which we used and Bender too. We called him Hymie Schwartz, which is a very Jewish name and we used to always refer to him by it so that no one would know who we were talking about.

[laughs]

AFI: We also witnessed and sort of participated in an anti-Vietnam war protest in Lisbon

BSI: We really didn’t participate. There was a demonstration against the war in Vietnam –

AFI: Which was probably organized by the PIDE, but it was a demonstration against the war in Vietnam in which all the participants were beaten up. That was an indication that if they ever demonstrated against the wars in Africa, Angola and Mozambique, this would happen to you and worse.

BSI: Right. Because it was Portuguese people demonstrating against the war in Vietnam. Well, we were coming home from some place. It was at the edge of the demonstration –

AFI: Which was near the Embassy of the United States.

BSI: We were taking photographs and somebody, a police officer –

AFI: A PIDE

BSI: came and grabbed me and my camera –

AFI: and Jerry's.

BSI: And he was going to confiscate it, but we went into the American Embassy and the marine that was on duty was very upset. They thought I was Portuguese because I have dark curly hair and was speaking in Portuguese. So, they thought I was Portuguese, but I told them I was American so we went into the Embassy and the marine grabbed my camera and said: "We are not giving this to the Portuguese", but then he opened it and exposed all my film. But he did give me back my camera.

AFI: So, we lived in Portugal for almost a year. During that period, we would go to the archive every day that it was open. In the Winter, we wore gloves because it was so cold. There were a handful of other people, who were very serious scholars. We had to learn how to read old Portuguese. Not only that, but the most important document I ever found had holes at various points through it.

BSI: ...holes that the worms had eaten through.

AFI: It was the single most important document I ever found and it was in complete ruins. It was about these slaves that we've talked about. It was very, very important.

DRC: Who was there, at the time, in the Arquivo Ultramarino?

AFI: They were mostly foreigners. In fact, the majority were probably Americans. Some Brits, too. They were studying various aspects of the history. There was not a lot. There were maybe four or five people there. It was a very small group. There was no one who became famous.

BSI: I don't think there was anyone else who was studying Mozambique, besides you.

DRC: So, [Joseph C. “Joe”] Miller came after, later.

AFI: We got him in. We were the ones who helped Joe Miller get permission to do research in Angola. We were all very serious scholars who worked very hard in the archives. Joe remained a close friend, but later on we did have a big falling out over Angola since he refused to speak out against Portuguese colonialism. A decade before his death we reconnected.

BSI: Well, there were these 12 volumes that Silva Rego[3] had published with summaries of all the documents. So, that’s where we started, by going through those volumes and picking up the *caixas* that we thought had the most interesting things on Mozambique.

AFI: And Silva Rego was a very serious scholar. He also believed in the Portuguese colonial mission. He was a person of integrity. We discussed a lot of ideas and we did not reveal our own politics to him, but we’d rather just discuss history. We were young people interested in history and *prazos*. He understood the *prazos* to be a Portuguese colonial institution, or feudal institution brought from Portugal to Mozambique, and we couldn’t dissuade him from that.

BSI: Well, in the first instance, the *prazeros* were Goans and Portuguese.

AFI: And he would also invite us occasionally to the Geographic Society [Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa], where he was also the President.

BSI: And we did do lots of research at the Geographic Society. And he understood that we were very serious scholars. He played a pivotal role in getting us admitted to Mozambique. We believe we were the first American scholars to be admitted to Mozambique since Marvin Harris.

3 António da Silva Rego, pref., *Documentação Ultramarina Portuguesa* (Lisboa: Centro de Estudos Históricos Ultramarinos, 1960)

He had a debate with [António] Rita Ferreira about labor migration to South Africa. Rita Ferreira said it was an economic phenomenon and Harris said it was a survival phenomenon to escape forced labor. And then, at the same time that we became professional acquaintances with Silva Rego, our friend Jerry met a man named Martim Cabral. Martim Cabral worked for a public relations firm in New York, in the United States. He came from an old Aristocratic family in the South[4]. So, the Portuguese government had retained a public relations firm in the United States, in New York. The role of the public relations firm was supposed to be to spread information about Portugal that was good.

AFI: About Angola and Mozambique –

BSI: About Portugal's relationship with its "overseas provinces", which is what they were called then. Somehow or other, we were introduced to this person.

AFI: I think it was through Jerry Bender.

BSI: Maybe. He would Portugal visit from time to time, and we met him. I think his family came from Évora, from an area around Évora.

AFI: We went to his estate once, where the workers bowed.

BSI: The workers were all in carts with donkeys. They were not in cars. When the lord, the head of the Manor passed, they would get out of their wagons and they would tip their hats and they would bow and he said to us: "in the old days all these women would be mine". It's disgusting.

AFI: So, Cabral thought of himself as being open-minded and liberal. He came from Adriano Moreira's school of thought. They wanted to ra-

4 Martim de Lencastre Cabral (1927-1991).

tionalize colonialism and end the most abusive dimensions, like forced labor, and the most obvious forms of racism. He believed it was critical for the Portuguese government to tell its story, which was a story of civilizing the Africans and bringing them into the modern world and treating them not as colonies, but as "overseas provinces", with the same rights as other Portuguese had. For Cabral, to win over sympathy, to tell that story, was essential. He believed that academics could really influence the United States government. He gave scholars like us too much power. Remember, at this point, the anti-Apartheid movement in United States was growing and it spilled over to the opposition to the Portuguese rule. And this was not only in African American communities, but in white progressive communities as well. There was growing international attention around this time. So he thought that if they could convince people like us, and later Joe Miller, that it would be an antidote; that we would tell the Portuguese story.

DRC: And do you think that Adriano Moreira was the guy supporting this Martim Cabral?

AFI: Yes, I do think so.

BSI: During the mid-1960s, when FRELIMO had already been created, there was an attempt to reach out to the American Government. And there was a meeting between [Eduardo] Mondlane and Bobby Kennedy, who was Attorney-General of the United States.

BSI: I think that the Portuguese were worried that FRELIMO would get some kind of support in the United States. And, in fact, there is some indication that the CIA was supporting both sides.

AFI: Here's what you have to know about that. So, FRELIMO leaders went and met with Bobby Kennedy. I think it was Mondlane, but I am not sure. They presented the struggle in Mozambique like the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. One person, one vote. And they

were shocked that these liberals, Bobby Kennedy, and John Kennedy, in particular, refused to support them because they believed in the civil rights, etc. And, of course, the reason the Kennedys didn't was because of the Azores and the fact that Portugal was a NATO ally. It happened though, and this is common knowledge, that Bobby Kennedy did arrange for a small amount of money (I think it was 15 000 dollars but I am not sure) that ultimately went to FRELIMO, for the Mozambican Institute, in Dar Es-Salaam, where Mozambican students in exile were being trained basic education and Janet Mondlane was the Director. So, anyway, what is clear is that United States is becoming more interested in what's happening in Angola and Mozambique, that Martim Cabral and probably other "forward-looking" people thought that it was very necessary to produce a counter narrative by serious American Scholars. So, that and Silva Rego – I don't know how the dynamics worked in the government, but at different times both of them spoke to people in the government.

DRC: But did you receive a sort of proposal from Martim Cabral in that sense?

AFI: No. He just said he thought that it would be very good for us to go and see the truth. He thought that we would be able to see the reality and come away as friends of, and appreciate, Lusotropicalism and the unique Portuguese experience. They got this originally from Gilberto Freyre, but by 1965 Charles Boxer had published *Race Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire*[5] which demystified Lusotropicalism. At the same time, a student of Portuguese Literature and language, James Duffy, wrote a book on Portuguese Africa.[6] So, you have their criticisms on the one hand. On the other hand, as you were saying, you have people like David M. Abshire and, to some degree, a scholar named Michael Samuels who wrote on education in Angola. They presented Portugal in a much more favorable light. So, that was the context.

5 Charles R. Boxer, *Race Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire, 1915-1825* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963)

6 James Duffy, *Portugal in Africa* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962).

BSI: So, Jerry Bender knew Michael Samuels, and Michael Samuels knew a lot of other people. And he might have known Cabral. I think he was really important in introducing us to that whole group of people. He was here before us. So, he overlapped a bit with Jerry and he was probably gone by the time we came, because we came a number of months after Jerry Bender.

AFI: So, in that situation I applied for a visa to stud –

BSI: And you were denied.

AFI: No!

BSI: Yes, you were denied originally, and then Silva Rego went to the foreign minister.

AFI: Are you sure?

BSI: Yes. I am pretty sure.

AFI: (Bobbie remembers these things). So anyway, I applied for a visa to study the Portuguese in the Zambezi Valley.

BSI: To study the *prazos.*

AFI: And whether it was the first time, or the second time, we were admitted.

BSI: Silva Rego intervened. Whether it was the first time or the second time, he wrote a letter to the foreign minister and our visa was approved and we were given a letter from the Foreign Ministry to present to the Governor of Mozambique. When we got there. He met us at the airport in Lourenço Marques.

Mozambique, 1967

BSI: We first flew to Luanda and we spent a few days there and then we flew to Lourenço Marques.

AFI: And in fact, in Luando we met a colleague of Martim Cabral, who was also a PR guy, working for the Portuguese government. He was an American. He took us to the Duque de Bragança Falls. He was very fat and he was living the good life in Luanda. He was working with Cabral. He was an associate of Cabral's. So, we spent a couple of days with them. He showed us around beautiful Luanda and how multiracial it was. Then we went to Lourenco Marques and we were met there, at the airport, by the Centro de Informação e Turismo.

BSI: But we did have an *encontro* with the Governor and we presented the letter and he asked us where we wanted to go.

AFI: You sure it was the Governor General?

BSI: Yes. He asked where we wanted to go and we said we wanted to go to the Zambezi Valley, the location of most of the *prazos* So, we started out in Tete. He gave us a letter to the Governor of Tete. And when we arrived in Tete we presented that letter. So, every place we went in Mozambique, the entire time we were there, we came with letters from the higher-up officials. We presented those letters to the official, whether it was the Province, or the District of the *Circunscrição*, we had a letter and, at each level we told them what we wanted to do.

AFI: The reaction was very interesting because everyone, to the extent that we said we were interested in the *prazos* and that we were also going to collect oral history, said: "oh, you want to study Myths and Legends".

[laughs]

AFI: That was very interesting because it depoliticized our research. They thought we were on a fantasy trip. Studying stupid stuff. So we were no threat.

BSI: Well, from their perspective, Africans did not have a history.

AFI: Or a culture or anything. So, they were sort of like humoring us and at the same time trying to show us how wonderful –

BSI: However, most of the interpreters that we had came through government sources so that they could keep an eye on us. Only when we were in Tete we stayed in a Hotel and we found our own interpreter, I believe, because there were lots of people there who spoke both Portuguese and the local languages.

AFI: So, in Tete we had the most autonomy because the Governor knew. We had dinner with him and then we would tell him where we wanted to go, and then we would send a telegram –

BSI: Saying that we were coming and then we would arrive and we would tell them we were there and what we wanted to do and then we would go out to villages and we would interview people.

AFI: Most interpreters came from Tete. But what we would do is, sometimes, talk with a well-respected individual in the community and, sometimes, with whole communities. And we always asked them all the questions about their ancestors and the history of the *prazos*. Everything was tape-recorded. And then, after we did that, we always played it back. Because that was in 1967 and 1968, and the local population had never seen a tape recorder and they were fascinated to hear their own voice on this machine and we told them this was very important because the reason you have to tell us their story in great detail is so that their children and grandchildren and great grandchildren will know your story.

BSI: So, the other thing was, we never asked anything about the colonial period or the present day. All of the questions were about long time ago.

AFI: Then, when we were done, people still wanted to talk. So, we turned off our tape recorder and Bobbie would take notes and that's when we would talk about the contemporary situation. And that's when some elders would tell us about forced labor and about the continuation of the slavery.

BSI: Sometimes. It would depend on who the interpreter was and it also depended on who else was there.

AFI: Very rarely did they talk about the war because we were mostly on the southern bank of the Zambezi and FRELIMO hadn't got there yet.

BSI: They [FRELIMO] hadn't got to the northern bank of the Zambezi either, where we were. Almost all the research was on the margins of the Zambezi, on both sides.

AFI: In Sena we had our first real taste of Lusotropicalism. We had an interpreter who was a teacher. We would go out to the field and then come back and a second interpreter would translate the actual questions we asked and the response. Because our Portuguese was not perfect, we wanted to make sure that we knew the actual question which the first interpreter posed, as well as the answer.

BSI: Allen would pose the question in Portuguese. Our interpreter would translate it into the local language. The PE would get then responses which he would then translate back into Portuguese. All of that was on the tape.

AFI: And generally, when we got back to Sena or Tete, we had a different person just listen to my question, the translation to Portuguese,

and the responses, to make sure that we got a response to a particular question. So, in case a person got it wrong and asked a different question, we understood what the answer was. While we were translating the tapes, the interpreter said he had to go to the bathroom. We were renting a room in a canteen that had a one-bedroom. We shared a bathroom with the owners of the canteen. When the wife of the owner of the canteen saw the interpreter going to the bathroom, she started yelling: "preto, vai embora. Não podes utilizar isso".

BSI: You heard her yelling at the interpreter, so you went into the hall.

AFI: And I said "he is my guest. He is working with me. I said he can use it." She said "he can't use it. He is a black man. He will make it disgusting". I said (our argument spilled over to the bar and was very public): "what do you mean, isn't this Lusotropicalism, where everyone is equal, black and white are all Portuguese. And there may have been ten people in the bar, or less, I don't know. But the next day, the Chefe de Posto, who was a former football player from Cabo Verde, and who was a very nice man, said: "be careful, the PIDE works here and PIDE follows you every day. When you go out the next day, they came and they question the people you interviewed the previous day".

BSI: He didn't know that. He only found that out later. He just told you to be careful because PIDE is following you and everywhere you go PIDE goes too. That's all he told you.

AFI: So, after that, we were particularly careful never to talk about political things, especially with the tape recorder on. And often not to talk about political things except with one or two people who would be on the sidelines. We also made multiple copies on small cassettes and we kept one set with us always and sent a set in the mail. We also made three or four copies of our notes. Go ahead Bobbie. What happened when they found out about our notes.?

BSI: After independence, in 1977, we were back in Mozambique and we went into the archives and we were just looking at things and there was a *relatório*. It was fifty typed written pages and it was about us. It was a *relatório* about our entire time –

DRC: By PIDE?

BSI: Yes. By PIDE. This was a decade after he had actually been there and it was after independence and, a copy of that had gone to some place.

AFI: Unfortunately, we couldn't "Xerox" it because it was in a section that was *classificada*. The PIDE had all this detailed ethnography. It was written by Ferraz de Freitas, a PIDE inspector who was obsessed with FRELIMO and did extraordinarily rich research on separatist churches, on the labor movement, on ethnic tensions[7].

BSI: It was the day after we left and a local PIDE agent would arrive in this village, he would call the people together and ask who we talked to. And then the people who said that we had talked to them were questioned. What they asked, what were the questions, we don't know. Generally speaking we didn't always have accommodation. So, if we went to an area where there were no hotels, then we stayed in the home of the local administrator. We did have a car and that's how we travelled around.

AFI: It was a Volkswagen and it got stuck in the sand all the time.

BSI: Sometimes, because of the ruts from the trucks. There were no paved roads, and at that time there was no bridge across the Zambezi, except the railroad bridge at Sena. To get from one side to the other

7 Afonso Ivens Ferraz de Freitas desempenhou diferentes funções no contexto do Estado colonial em Moçambique, entre as quais a de Curador dos Negócios Indígenas e a de Administrador do Concelho de Lourenço Marques.

we had to go on a car ferry, to get to the northern bank. But then we would be travelling and we'd come across a little river and there would be some wood and you'd drive onto the wood and there was a chain for you to pull and that took the boat to the other side of the little river. So we went down the Zambezi. After Sena we went to Sena Sugar and then we went almost all the way down to Chinde on the southern side. And then, afterwards, we crossed over on a boat that was carrying sugar and we went to Luabo and that was the last place we went to, which is on the northern bank.

AFI: We did research on both sides of the Zambezi. We talked to a lot of different people. We saw all the abuses. We witnessed them. Then we went back to live in Lourenço Marques for a couple of months because we worked in the archive there. We met with Portuguese intellectuals, like Lobato, who was very helpful, and Rita Ferreira, who was very helpful. Both of them treated us as serious colleagues and just assumed we subscribed to Lusotropicalism, in one way or another. They were both very serious scholars who were very conservative politically, but very conservative scholars too. So, everything was closely tied to documents in the case of Lobato. And Rita Ferreira had all these ideas about anthropology that were pretty out of date already, as anthropology was then.

BSI: During the time we were doing this research we asked a lot of questions about Chikunda because there were police on the *prazos*. Where they came from, where they integrated in local society, how they got their wives, what happened to them over time, how they lived, how their lives were organized.

AFI: But the most important question we asked was about the *prazeros*. We were very interested in the way they became, over many centuries, Africanized. So, we asked a lot of questions about that, because in some ways that was the most dramatic part of the book.[8] Rather

8 Allen F. Isaacman, *Mozambique: The Africanization of a European Institution, The Zambezi Prazos, 1750-1902* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1972).

than having Europeans going overseas and Westernizing the Africans or Asians. Here you had the exact reverse. You had Europeans becoming Africanized.

DRC: Did you ever receive a response on your book, by Lobato, for instance?

AFI: There was one from Silva Rego. I remember he was very angry. He said that it was a betrayal. Bobbie says she remembers him saying that it was a stab in the back.

BSI: He said he embraced you and that you stabbed him in the back.

DRC: He told that in oral terms or written?

AFI: No. It was in a review somewhere.

BSI: It was after Allen published his article in *Studia*.[9] But we were also very lucky that we came across a number of people during our stay in this area who were themselves related to former *prazeros*.

AFI: And you could see them. They kept their Portuguese last name, but in almost all other respects they were African.

BSI: There was one man we interviewed in Tete. We went to a village and he lived in a hut in the village, but when he came out to interview us he came out in a three-piece suit, wearing shoes and a tie because that was his European persona. But when he was not in his European persona he was in an African persona, living in an African village.

AFI: And having three wives and many children. And his last name was Ferrão.

9 Allen Isaacman, "The Prazos da Coroa 1752-1830. A Functional Analysis of the Political System", *Studia* 26 (1969): 149-178.

ND: And at the same time Malyn Newitt was writing about –

AFI: So, Newitt had finished his dissertation already.

BSI: Before we went to Portugal, we went to London and Allen met with Newitt. He was very discursive.

AFI: Newitt was one of Boxer's students. He came from more of a Portuguese overseas imperial perspective and wrote a very serious book. We disagree on a number of things, but it is a very serious and fine book.[10] He finished his dissertation before I started writing it. I think in some ways he was very jealously guarded because he was finishing his PhD and here comes someone else who was writing on the same subject. But we have a very good professional relationship to this day.

AFI: And then, after we were in the Zambezi valley we went back to Lourenço Marques and we saw the oppression and discrimination in the city and we also went to the shanty towns, the *subúrbios*.

BSI: Well, at that time we had met a number of sculptors and painters who were Africans or who were *mestiços*.

AFI: Even though this was a highly racialised and racist society, there was a grey area. A very small one, where a small number of progressive whites, mostly anti-fascists, not necessarily pro-FRELIMO, although some were, and Mozambicans, some *assimilados*, others not, but artists, writers, poets and dancers.

ND: And have you met Craveirinha?

AFI: I never met Craveirinha. I interacted with people like Malangatana, and [Alberto] Chissano, the sculptor.

10 Malyn Newitt, *Portuguese Settlement on the Zambesi: Exploration, Land Tenure and Colonial Rule in East Africa* (New York: Africana Publishing Corp., 1972).

AFI: We were not part of that community. We also did meet, in the countryside, in Beira and in Lourenço Marques, a handful of democratic Portuguese, that is how they defined themselves, who told us that they had come to Mozambique, primarily Beira, but also Lourenço Marques, to escape the "long arm of Salazar". Life was much freer for them in Beira and, to a lesser degree, in Lourenço Marques than it was in Portugal.

DRC: Do you remember names?

AFI: I would have to look at my notes, but I don't right off hand. I remember one Administrator, I think was in Gorongosa, who said he had taken the position to flee the fascist regime in Portugal. There, of course, there was an organization, which I write about in my book. It was a democratic organization which was segregated until 1961. Then, there were people who were anti-fascist. Some of them may have had a connection with the PCP, I don't know, but they were clearly anti--fascist, and some of them then, ultimately, joined cells of FRELIMO. That's where you get the first white Mozambicans in FRELIMO.

BSI: But as far as I recall, we never talked to anybody about FRELIMO.

AFI: No because FRELIMO was underground. They had cells.

ND: But you were in Lourenço Marques more than ten years after Marvin Harris, and the situation was not so different in terms of race relations.

AFI: No, it was not different at all. It was so obvious. People would beat their servants.

BSI: The only people we knew and socialized with, who weren't white, were relatives of Luis Polonah's. His whole family lived in Lourenço Marques. They befriended us and invited us to dinner and we did thin-

gs with them and so, at one point, the matriarch, the grandmother, had a heart problem and had to go to South Africa and she was very light-skinned. She looked pretty much white, but her daughter, who was accompanying her, was darker. She and her daughter went separately on the train. They were both on the same train, but in different sections and they didn't speak to each other because the grandmother was passing as white, and it was only when they got to South Africa that they reunited.

An engaged historiography

AFI: In 1969 we returned to the United States and shortly after I fled to New York to meet Sharfuddin Khan., the FRELIMO representative to the U.N. At that time, I joined the American Committee in Africa, which was anti-Apartheid, but also it extended its interest to Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau. It had links with the British-based organization MAGIC – short for Mozambique, Angola, Guinea-Bissau Information Centre – which was in London. Then, in 1971 or 72, I became a member of the fledgling Committee for Free Mozambique which was based primarily in New York. We were living a thousand miles away, in Minneapolis, but I would participate. We then began to put out a magazine called Southern Africa and the Committee for Free Mozambique was part of the larger anti-Apartheid movement and then it was joined by a couple of people who had worked in the FRELIMO school in Tanzani, Bill Minter and Ruth Minter. In 1972, we went to Rhodesia, because we were already collecting information for a book on the tradition of resistance, and we tried to get into Mozambique and we were told we would not be permitted. We also tried to get into South Africa and we were also not permitted. So, we continued our work in the United States and in 1974 was when Bobbie started law school at the University of Minnesota and was involved in women's political activities. Right after independence. In late 1975, early 1976, we were both invited by Aquino de Bragança to work in Mozambique.

BSI: You [Allen] came in 1976, then we both came for the summer, in 1977. You were still doing research on the tradition of resistance during that time you connected with Aquino de Bragança. And then we were invited to come back in 1978. So, we lived there with our children, who were four and eight, when we arrived, from September 1978 until the end of 1979.

DRC: Let me try to frame it. Until now you have been talking more about politics than about academia or the content of your research and books. In order to clarify things and to illustrate that aspect, what is the importance of politics for your books?

AFI: Our books always had two dimensions that were fundamentally political. The first was about revealing the oppressive nature of Portuguese colonial capitalism and the second was to tell the stories of oppressed people who are in the shadows of history.[11] Peasants, workers, women and men, etc. To tell their stories. So, all our research, every book that we have written, every monograph that we have written are derived from, in the most dramatic and creative ways, oral history. So, it was very important as an historian to demonstrate the historical agency of Mozambican peoples. How they coped with, creatively adapted to, and sometimes struggled against oppression. So, the first book was a book on how they, to some extent, controlled their cultural destiny. By protecting their cultural autonomy, they could control their cultural destiny, by assimilating the Portuguese in the Zambezi Valley rather than the reverse. The second book – *Tradition of Resistance*[12] – argued that there was a long anti-colonial tradition which went back to the sixteenth century and in the last chapter of that book we established that FRELIMO used those living memories of resistance to

11 *Mozambique: The Africanization of a European Institution, The Zambezi Prazos, 1750-1902* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, June 1972); *The Tradition of Resistance in Mozambique: The Zambezi Valley, 1850-1921* (Portsmouth N.H.: Heinemann and University of California Press, 1976)

12 Allen F. Isaacman, T*he Tradition of Resistance in Mozambique: The Zambezi Valley, 1850-1921* (London: Heinemann and University of California Press, 1976)

mobilize public support, populist support, peasants primarily, in the Zambezi Valley. Then I wrote a book called *A Luta Continua: Creating a new society in Mozambique*, a book published by the Fernand Braudel Centre, which was the first book in English which looked at a tale of two societies: colonial society and the liberated zones.[13] And the other one was about the armed struggle.[14] It emphasized FRELIMO's dreams and vision of what a new society would look like.

DRC: You were the ones establishing a link between [Immanuel] Wallerstein and Aquino?

AFI: No. Aquino and Wallerstein had a longer link, going back. Wallerstein had some connections with the French left and Braudel, and Aquino was there. So then we wrote a book together, *Mozambique: from Colonialism to Revolution*, in 1982. It was based on our experiences and was meant to be a follow-up of the book *A Luta Continua*. It was meant as a general history of Mozambique in the twentieth century. It had high-level generalizations with an emphasis on what was happening since independence.

BSI: When we lived in Mozambique in 1978 and 1979, I had a grant from the UN Economic Commission for Africa to write a book on women's legal position in Mozambique (that was part of the UN's Decade of Women and nothing had been written on Mozambique).[15] I worked primarily with a friend of mine, June Stephens, who was an archaeologist and also taught at the University of Eduardo Mondlane. She and I went out with the O.M.M. (Mozambican Woman's Movement); but we always went with several women from the O.M.M. We went out and

13 Allen F. Isaacman, Barbara Isaacman*, A Luta Continua: Creating a New Society in Mozambique* (New York: Fernand Braudel Center, SUNY, 1978).

14Allen F. Isaacman, Barbara Isaacman*, Mozambique: From Colonialism to Revolution: 1900-1982* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1983)

15 Barbara Isaacman, June Stephen, *United Nations. Economic Commission for Africa (1980). Mozambique : women, the law and agrarian reform* (Addis Ababa: UN, 1980) (Available at https://repository.uneca.org/handle/10855/3793) [trad. A mulher moçambicana no processo de libertação, Instituto Nacional do Livro e do Disco, 1984]

interviewed women in almost all the provinces. I don't think we got to Zambezia. Also, Allen and I spent some time in Cabo Delgado for research on forced cotton production in the colonial period. There we also interviewed women who had been in the *destacamento feminino*, to go into this book. That book was published in the UN. It must have been in the 1980 or 1981 and it was translated into Portuguese. For a time in Mozambique, it was about the only book that was at the INLD – The Instituto Nacional do Livro e do Disco.

AFI: Even though Bobbie did not consider herself an historian, she is a great researcher and critic and also played a very important role in writing the history of women in Mozambique, in which she did pioneering work. Then she didn't continue because she was a lawyer, but her work in 1980 and 1981 was among the first works on women in the armed struggle and women in post-independent Mozambique.

BSI: I also played another role in all of this because women are very unlikely to come forward to recount their stories because they are cowed by the group they are in. Women are seen as not having stories to tell, and they are loath to speak if the interviewer is a male. So, for a number of books...

AFI: ...but particularly for the Chikunda book, which was the most important.[16] Bobbie spoke to them about...

BSI: ...about pottery, about markings and about initiations rites –

AFI: ...and sexuality, things they would not talk to me about.

BSI: ...because there were all kinds of things that happened so men were supposed to abstain from sexual relationships before a hunt because otherwise

16 Allen F. Isaacman, Barbara Isaacman, *Slavery and Beyond: The Making of Men and Chikunda Ethnic Identity in the Unstable World of South Central Africa, 1750-1920* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2005)

they would lose the ability to kill. So, there were all kinds of things going on between men and women that women were loath to talk about to a male. So, in the area around Zumbo, we were lucky because one of our interpreters was a woman, so she and I were able to talk with women separately, and they were much more forthcoming about things. But women, even if they weren't talking about sexual things, were less likely to speak about anything in front of a group of men, if they were being questioned by men and they were more likely to be more open if they were being questioned by someone other than a man, and there were no men around. So, if they were questioned alone, by a woman, that was useful too. So, I was able to get information that Allen would not have been able to get.

AFI: The only thing I failed to mention was that in the period from 1975 to 1977, I was called as an expert witness before Congress. So, I testified before Congress in 1975 and 1976 about FREMILO and why the United States should recognize this new government. I also, periodically, would brief new Ambassadors who went to Mozambique. As it happened, two of the Ambassadors who went to Mozambique were outstanding people. One was a woman named Melissa Wells, who was terrific and really cared about the Mozambican people – they both did. And the other was William "Bill" DePree. These were magnificent. The best foreign service people and they really cared about Mozambique's future.

BSI: When we were in Mozambique after independence, we didn't have anything to do with the American government. In the colonial period there wasn't an American Embassy anyway. Then we were *cooperantes*, working in support of the revolution. We did register with the American Embassy.

Defining Portuguese Colonialism

DRC: If I can raise the question about these three books on cotton, slavery and Cahora-Bassa.[17]

17 Allen F. Isaacman, *Cotton is the Mother of Poverty: Peasants, Work and Rural Struggle in Colonial Mozambique 1938-1961* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1996); Allen F. Isaacman,

AFI: Yes. So, cotton and Cahora-Bassa are both the same story in different times. Both highlight Portuguese colonial exploitation of labor and extraction of scarce resources to benefit Lisbon. The first case, it was to get cotton at less than one quarter of the world price, which enabled them to compete. And for years many cotton producers, received as little as five dollars for a year's labor. And they didn't even have enough money to buy a *capulana* (a cotton cloth to make a dress or loin cloth). The peasants, mostly women, forced to grow cotton always said "Cotton is the Mother of Poverty" which became the title of our book. Cahora-Bassa was also about the Portuguese exploitation, even though the energy went to South Africa, so South African was the obvious beneficiary, at one-sixth of the world price. At the same time, Portugal benefitted because it became the basis for their military alliance and the South Africans provided military support. So, it reinforced this alliance, and South Africa preferred to fight on the Zambezi rather than Limpopo. So, both of them used forced labor. Less so in Cahora-Bassa, but also in Cahora-Bassa, even though it was illegal and many Africans died in industrial accidents because they didn't have proper protection when they were down mining. So, both are classical examples of Portuguese colonialism on the cheap.

ND: This is a very broad question about what is singular about Portuguese colonialism in a comparative perspective.

AFI: What is singular about Portuguese colonialism as opposed to British or French colonialism? It's not that one is better or worse or more or less racist. But Portuguese colonialism was always done without the capital necessary to effectively exploit the colony. Because it cost a lot to build roads and administrative infrastructure and to have well-trained administrators, and doctors and the like. The Portuguese didn't have the capital to invest because, even when we got here in the 1960s, Portugal was an economic colony of Great Britain.

Barbara Isaacman, *Slavery and Beyond: The Making of Men and Chikunda Ethnic Identity in the Unstable World of South Central Africa, 1750-1920* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2005); Allen F. Isaacman, Barbara Isaacman, *Dams, Displacement, and the Delusion of Development: Cahora Bassa and Its Legacies in Mozambique, 1965-2007* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2013).

BSI: The electricity company flag in Lisbon was British. It wasn't Portuguese.

AFI: So, the only way they could exploit the colonies was by exploiting African labor.

BSI: Or extracting raw materials.

AFI: And, even with the extraction of raw materials, the way they did it was to create concessionary companies – whether it was cotton concessionary companies, or rice concessionary companies, or these large companies, like the Companhia de Moçambique. The companies essentially were quasi-states, states within states. They governed and ruled. So, Portugal didn't have to spend much.

BSI: So, it was like the *prazos*, but an updated version.

AFI: Portuguese colonialism was always colonialism on the cheap. And it was a very brutal form. Not because the Portuguese are more racist, I am not saying that. Not at all. But because the nature of their extraction depended on forced labor.

ND: And this was so until the end?

AFI: Until the end. Whereas the British and the French, by the 1940s, made all these reforms and were able to pay better wages. Not that people weren't exploited, but the exploitation was more at the level of the marketplace than physical exploitation.

BSI: So, when we arrived in Mozambique in 1978 every single highway and railroad led out of the country. So, there was a railroad from Lourenço Marques to South Africa. There was a road from Lourenço Marques to South Africa or Swaziland which was paved, but after that, there was nothing. There was a road from Beira to Rhodesia and there

was a railroad from Beira to Rhodesia. There was a railroad from Beira to Malawi. No roads. And I guess there was a railroad from Nacala to Malawi. So, when we had to go to the Zambezi Valley from Lourenço Marques, we had to through Swaziland, through South Africa, through Rhodesia and back into Mozambique because there were no paved roads from Lourenço Marques to Beira at that time. There were no paved roads anywhere in Mozambique. There were dirt roads and there were improved dirt roads. It was only with the war against FRELIMO that they began to pave the roads, so the army could get there. That was the only reason.

DRC: This is a very interesting point. It is not racism that is determining the nature of colonialism.

AFI: Right. It was not only racism. It was the absence of capital and the levels of exploitation. But the level of exploitation was explained in racist terms. So, racism was a very powerful ideology. So, how did that play out? The colonial regime insisted that it was necessary force Africans to work because Africans were lazy, *preguiçosos*. Africans were *bêbados* [drunkards]. So, you had to civilize them and bring them into the modern world because they were inferior, without any history or culture, and therefore you had to make them black Portuguese. The point is that it was premised on racist notions and many Portuguese, not all but many, were racist. It is the combination of the two: the lack of capital and racist ideology that made it such a unique form of colonialism. And Belgian [colonialism] is like that too, by the way.

DRC: So, in that context, [Frantz] Fanon is also talking about racism as being the main frame of colonialism.

AFI: Fanon is right in this respect, which is very important. Fanon said: the worst legacy and the most brutal impact of colonialism was colonizing the mind. And that's what the Portuguese attempted to do, but of course they didn't have the infrastructure for schools, so it was

not like Algeria, not in the same way. And all they wanted to do was to give most Mozambicans a veneer of Portuguese education so they could communicate with their "boys" working in the factories, so in the fields, as servant servants. In 1951, after five centuries, there were only a small number of *assimilados*, almost all of whom were located in Lourenço Marques.

DRC: So, where do you think Fanon is not right?

AFI: Well, I think Fanon is right about the racism.

BSI: All colonialism is racist in the sense that you feel that you are a superior country and you are subjecting inferiors, and you maintain them as inferiors. You do not allow them to become equals.

AFI: Fanon is right in two respects: about the racism and about colonizing the mind. Portuguese colonialism is a unique form of colonialism. It is not different in that respect, but it is unique because it depended almost exclusively on the extraction of scarce resources: labor and minerals. So, there was no effort, for instance, like in Ghana, let's say, to encourage peasants to grow cocoa at market price and then they would export them to Great Britain. Rather, if the Portuguese wanted cotton or rice, they'd made them grow it and there was no economic incentive. Why would someone grow cotton, which is terrible? It takes all this labor so you can't grow food and it also destroys the land. Why would someone grow that for five dollars a year? On the other hand, peasants in Ghana, after WWII, or even before, were getting a price where they could be relatively prosperous and so voluntarily grew cocoa. So, that's the big difference. The Belgian Congo and Portugal are very similar in some respects. They are both small, underdeveloped themselves and they were extracting by forced, brutal labor the scarce resources.
DRC: But how can you explain, in general terms, for a general public, how a country that was relying on cheap colonialism was able to manage a strong state.

AFI: No. So, here's the thing. It was not a strong state. It was a weak state and weak states have to use brutal force. Strong states don't have to use brutal force because, as Gramsci or others say, they could win over people's hearts and minds. People in Mozambique were terrified all the time. Everyone knew PIDE. Everyone knew of PIDE. Everyone was worried that in their village there was an informant for PIDE. So, the Portuguese state was very weak. IN certain areas you'd have 20 000 people and you would have one *Chefe de Posto*, but he had PIDE behind him and also African SPs –African police, who spied on people, and African chiefs who were paid by the government. So, it was colonialism really on the cheap. There were times when the *Chefe de Posto* was isolated from the Provincial Capital for several months a year because of the rains. So, the only way they communicated was through telex. So, it was not a strong state. It was not like Portugal, although in some ways it was like Portugal, in terms of fear. But you have a culture of fear in Mozambique, which is a critical thing. That's why the symbols of Portuguese oppression were two things: the whip, used for flogging people, and the *palmatória*, and what is very interesting is that when Portuguese officials beat people they always did it publicly so that other people would see: "This is what is going to happen to you if you don't follow the law, so if you are not timid". So, the Portuguese state was a very weak state.

DRC: So, it is the *chicote* and *palmatória*.

AFI: Yeah. And that's very different, after WWII, in the British colonies. After WWII the British and French recognized that they had to reform colonialism, and even imagined the day, especially the British, when the colonies would be free. Whereas the Portuguese held on to the myth of the overseas right up and through the arm struggle. So, you could say that in the British colonies decolonization was very much about the withdrawal of the British, but they maintained control of a lot of the economy. So, you go from colonialization to decolonialization. In the Portuguese colonies, and to a degree in the Congo, because the Belgium foreign minister said in 1959 that the Congo would be a Belgium colony for 500 years.

And the Portuguese had the same notions. These were the Overseas. And they [the Portuguese] were making reforms inside the notion of these being permanent. Part of that, as you said earlier, has to do with this incredible state ideology here that if Portugal did not have his colonies it would be weak, and a minor state, and it would be eaten by Spain.

The Chikunda, ethnicity and masculinity

DRC: You didn't talk about the Chikunda.

AFI: So, they were slaves on the *prazos*, but they rebelled and fled into the interior.

BSI: Also, a lot of the *prazos* fell apart.

AFI: In the 1840s and 1850s, there were also famines and natural disasters and they fled into the interior, as runaway slaves, and they created their own societies and communities, some of which were independent while some others were governed by warlords – Afro-Asian warlords, mostly. They were very ambiguous and contradictory because they were both former slaves and they survived by becoming slavers and elephant hunters.

BSI: But they had been doing that for the *prazos* previously and so they were aware of the trade routes and they were aware of where the resources were and where the *prazos* fell apart, they continued to be plunders. They did it sometimes on their own, sometimes working for Portuguese merchants.

AFI: And they are feared until today.

ND: One interesting thing about this book is that you say it is in a way a slave group that becomes an ethnic group.[18]

18 Allen F. Isaacman, Barbara Isaacman*, Slavery and Beyond: The Making of Men and Chikunda Ethnic Identity in the Unstable World of South Central Africa, 1750-1920* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2005).

AFI: That's very important because it shows that ethnicity .... There is this theory that ethnicity was created by the colonial regimes. The creation of tribalism. In fact, Africans had their own capacity to create their new ethnic identities. These Chikunda came from more than twenty five different ethnic groups. They lived side by side, intermarried on *prazos* then fled and took this name Chikunda, which is a Shona word kukunda, which means "to conquer". And to this day people in Mozambique and Zimbabwe have great fear of many Chikunda, the seniors.

BSI: But people also self-describe themselves as Chikundas.

AFI: The Chikundas are very proud because they are considered the best elephant hunters. And they manufactured their own guns. They would make guns themselves, modelled after European guns, but they made them and they made them better. The other thing was that they were extraordinary, knew an enormous amount about the microecology, and so when they hunted they knew exactly where the elephants were and where the wind was coming from. Elephants can't see well, but have very good hearing and smell, so you had to crawl on the backside when the wind wasn't blowing. What they would do with their hatchets was cutting their tendons and then the elephants would fall over and they would spear them or shoot them. So, they would crawl right up, and with these little hatchets cut the tendons of the ankles.
BSI: So, there are other interesting things about the fact that many of the Chikunda came, originally, from matrilineal people, but they became patrilineal on the *prazos*, and they took that with them when they left the *prazos* and moved inland and conquered areas on the way to Zambia. And they had to create their own cosmology, where they were tied in some way to ancestors, because that is how you got legitimacy.

AFI: ...and protection.

ND: The Chikunda were not precisely an "ideal" group of resistance.

AFI: No. So here is a thing about the Chikunda. I originally thought of them like the Maroons (runaways) in Jamaica. But in fact they were very contradictory and ambiguous. They were runaway slaves who, often in the end of the nineteenth century, or from the 1850s onwards, became slavers, sometimes working with warlords and sometimes by themselves. So, they are situated in a very ambiguous position. And because they looked down on the farming, from their days on the *prazos*, and they had this culture that said that farming was women's work. The only other thing they did was hunting. Hunt people, hunt elephants. So, in the beginning of the colonial period, some resisted the Portuguese, but after they were defeated –

BSI: Well, when they established conquest-states in the interior, those conquest-states then resisted the Portuguese.

AFI: But in the end, when they were defeated, a number of the Chikunda worked as SPs or police because that was a skill they had and the Portuguese thought of them as being almost as good as Shangaan or Ngoni because the Portuguese had in mind, incorrectly, that some Africans had this primordial skills, genetic propensity or predisposition to be warlike. And they tried to use warlike people, good fighters in their armies, and indeed in most of the conquest of Mozambique Africans were working in the Portuguese army, including a substantial number of people who were of Ngoni descendant.

ND: You talk about the importance of masculinity for the Chikunda. And you also studied this gender question a lot, this transition from the presence of colonial power and how it dealt with the previous gender balance in African societies. This is a huge question: how did colonialism changed, reinforced or transformed the previous balance of gender?

AFI: In general, this is true not only in Mozambique, but all over, colonialism reinforced patriarchy, reinforced positions of men in many

different ways. First of all, reinforcing the positions of chiefs, reinforcing men as the only legitimate earners of income and the only work colonialism counted was men's work in the money economy, so the work of the household, domestic labor, didn't count. And there were laws, like young boys going to school, that reinforced all the notions of gender hierarchy and privilege.

BSI: One of the interesting things about the Chikunda is that many of them came from north of the Zambezi. They were originally imported in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries onto the *prazos.* And north of the Zambezi they were matrilineal people, which didn't mean that husbands weren't in power, but that they were in power in their relationship to women, but they still held the power. Most of the *prazos* were on the southern bank of the Zambezi river, in areas that were patrilineal, and in the slave villages on the *prazos* they took wives from the local area and, over time, they became patrilineal. Then, when they turned into conquest states, they imposed their patrilineality n all of the areas that they conquered. They also had to create a relationship to the land that didn't exist because they weren't from that land, but they created relationships to ancestors, of course male ancestors, who then gave them power.

Gender, resistance and post-colonial rule

ND: But you found the same imbalance within the armed struggle against the Portuguese?

BSI: Well, yes and no.

AFI: FRELIMO's leadership was all male and even though emancipation of women is a central part of the revolution, and revolution couldn't succeed without women. And it is true that it was a military detachment - *destacamento feminino* – that Bobbie studied, the fact of the matter is that the entire leadership of FRELIMO was male and, in

fact, if you look at the first government, there is only one woman and it is Graça Simbine, who became Samora's wife. Bobbie knows very well, from her experience with the O.M.M, that O.M.M. was subordinated to male-dominated FRELIMO leadership.

BSI: So, when the O.M.M. had conferences, the conferences were run by some male member from the Central Committee.

AFI: Who gave the keynote address.

BSI: And who was also, basically, in charge of everything that happened, but one of the things we discovered living in Mozambique in the late 70s and interacting with people from other socialist countries in Europe was that the same ideology existed in Eastern Europe and in Mozambique, which was an ideology of emancipation, but really women continued only to be significant in their relationship to men. So, the women who were in charge of things, tended to be the spouses of men who were in charge.

AFI: And there was double exploitation determining they had to work both in the factories and in domestic labor.

BSI: In Mozambique there was more double exploitation than probably there was in Europe.

AFI: Why?

BSI: Well because, at least Western Europe, you had more social systems that existed that could take over some of the jobs that women had to... They had daycares, they had way more organized structures than there were in Mozambique. In Mozambique there wasn't anybody. There weren't creches around for everybody. So, women were expected to take care of children, to cook, to clean, to work and the men just worked. So, the liberation of women added to their exploitation rather than actually liberating them.

AFI: Although there was a change in values and Mozambique was contradictory because, after independence, Samora [Machel] and FRELIMO treated girls/women going to school as a very high priority . So, the number of young women who go to school increases enormously from what was a small percentage.

BSI: In the urban areas there were factory jobs, there were other kinds of work that women could have. And those kinds of jobs were not available in the rural areas.

AFI: But then you begin to have a generation of women who do go to high school and become doctors, and follow some of the same patterns as we see in socialist countries. Then you begin to see more women in parliament and more women in high party positions.

BSI: Have there been any women governors of any provinces of Mozambique that were women?

AFI: There was a woman who was a Prime-Minister, Luísa Diogo. And there are women in several other Ministries, but it is fair to say that patriarchal legacies of colonialism and of the indigenous societies tend to have enormous lasting power, still. It is changing. Younger people certainly have very different attitudes both about gender and about race. Young educated people in the city move much more easily across gender and across race. than what was characteristic in the colonial period.

BSI: Even though the O.M.M. was subordinated to men in the government, the O.M.M had a very important function in organizing women and this is one of the things that was clear from travelling around the country with O.M.M. My friend and I, before we wrote this book, we visited almost every province and we met with women in different positions. Women who worked in factories, women who worked in agriculture, women who were involved with O.M.M and it did provide them with greater awareness of what was going on with their society and

what was possible for them. And O.M.M did encourage women to get more actively involved in political life, at the local level. I think that was very important. I don't know the extent to which the O.M.M continued to play an important function in the post-socialist period. During the armed struggle they transported materials and messages behind the Portuguese lines. So, there was an attempt to involve them from the very beginning in the armed struggle in some way or another. Even before there was a *destacamento feminino*, girls and boys were used. Girls and boys were much easier to use because they were less obvious to the Portuguese so they were less likely to get caught. And I think it was important when they were allowed to learn to carry arms and the ideal was that they were participants, in some way, in the armed struggle, because that was, again, a way of including groups that have previously been excluded.

ND: I guess it was in the "Samora book" (*Mozambique's Samora Machel: A life cut short*) that you said that there was some kind of stance against a certain idea of modern woman, urban woman. There was a kind of conservative Christian morality.

BSI: Yes, but that is true about both sexes. It is not just women because, really, if you look closely at the idea of the Mozambican man, it is very much a Protestant religious –

AFI: Part of it is. It is not all protestant. It reveals Samora's missionary Protestantism.

BSI: Right. Because a lot of people in FRELIMO were involved with Protestant missionaries, since the Catholic missionaries did not allow them to proceed past the third grade. So, if they wanted to get any kind of education it had to be through the Protestant missionaries. So, they picked up a lot of Protestant ideology and shortly after independence, when they were trying to create a new man, it was a nuclear family in which people behaved appropriately, in which they were kind

to everybody, in which they did their jobs, they didn't get drunk, they didn't go dancing, they didn't wear high heels, they didn't wear tight skirts. It was all very much Protestant ideology that got wrapped up in the concept of what the new Mozambican family was all about.

Oral History and African Studies

ND: Can you place your work inside the historiographical field from the beginning of the 1960s?.

AFI: So, because I came out of the Civil Rights Movement and I was part of the first generation of graduates in African History, we were rebelling against Eurocentric and colonial history, and the idea that Africa had no history. So, I studied with Vansina and other people.

ND: And Vansina was very important?

AFI: Very important as my mentor, but also because he protected me against other Professors who were opposed to my political activism.

BSI: He was crucial, ideologically, in the field.

AFI: No. Epistemologically.

BSI: Because he bought this idea of oral history to Wisconsin and the other person in Wisconsin was [Philip D.] Curtin. Curtin came out of colonial imperial history. Curtin was very technologically savvy, so he grabbed on to this concept and understood the power of technology.

DRC: But Curtin was not a charismatic figure?

AFI: Yes. He was very important because he understood one thing. He was a great historian. Very conservative, but a great historian. He understood that the role of the historian was to use every source possible, but to

accept none acritically. So, when Vansina came and showed the value of oral history, it became a new source which allowed Curtin and the generation that he and Vansina taught to go to the field to show that Africans had a history. In the past, the argument was a kind of circular one. If Africans had a history, they would have a written language to preserve that history. And Vansina was saying that there are many ways to preserve history and that oral history was very important, not only in Africa, but in Europe. So, he talks about this Song of Roland and the Odyssey and Iliad which were all, originally, transmitted orally. Vansina provided the epistemological basis for much future research relying on oral sources.

BSI: The way African society was organized was that people transmitted ideas from one generation to the next through talks around the fire at night and all of these things.

AFI: And rites of initiation, to become an adult.

BSI: It was less formal and structured. It was more fluid but it was equally significant, if not more so, but it had to be interrogated against other sources, maybe other oral traditions or written sources too. Then you got a fuller picture if you were looking at what was in the archives, that had its own set of limitations, and what was oral, which had a different set of limitations.

DRC: So, you were one of the first students of Vansina.

AFI: Yes. The other thing that is very important to recall is that by the 1980s we began to realize the limits of oral history. Some sceptics argued that you can't trust oral sources at all, but what we began to realize is that they have to be read critically because there is a politics of memory associated with oral history. People choose to forget some things and remember other things for a variety of different reasons. So, these oral sources have to be treated very critically, but no more critically than written sources because people choose to remember some things and write things down

because of their positionality. Then there was also this question of whether it different to collect oral histories if you are from outside the community or inside, or if you're white or black., etc. And it is true that if you are inside the community you have linguistic and cultural skills that someone like me doesn't have. But anyone who is inside the community and goes to get a PhD. to come back to study is outside the community because the mere fact that they left the community and lived in a different world means they are no longer a part of that community. So, it gets to all these questions about knowledge production and positionality.

BSI: There was another thing that we discovered because, overtime, we went back to the same areas and we interviewed people who were relatives of people we had interviewed before: as the institutions in rural society break down, the ability to preserve information from generation to generation declines.

AFI: Or the interest.

BSI: Or the interest. But also, you don't spend the time seating around with you elders, night after night. You do other things. So, we interviewed this Ferrão in 1968, who was a relative of a *prazero*, who was known as an historian, a very good historian. We interviewed his grandson forty years later, who was also known as a very good historian, but his knowledge was not anywhere near as deep and rich as his grandfather's had been. So, he told us the same thing, but he told it..

AFI: ...as an outline.

BSI: So, we were able to see the ways in which, as a society changes, the ability to transmit, the ability to remember also changes.

ND: You talked about Vansina, but what were the other genealogies of your work. I am thinking about, for instance, the relations with the Social Sciences, more broadly.

AFI: So, Vansina was very important in my work. So were two other people. One was Terence Ranger who wrote a lot about the history of resistance, primarily in Zimbabwe. And the other was Basil Davidson. Those were the three people who, at the beginning, were most important. And then, also important were labor historians like E.P. Thomson and Eric Wolf, who wrote on peasant wars, and Eric Hobsbawm, who wrote about social bandits and primitive rebels. So, that trajectory. Then, I carved out my own space because Vansina wasn't an activist, but he was very committed to African History. And where I carved out my space is this notion about writing about people who are in the shadows of history.

BSI: But there is another thing that came from your experience at Wisconsin, which is thr fact that, in addition to the African History Program, African History was part of a comparative Third World History. So, all non-majority histories from outside the United States. What you all refer to lovingly as Comp Swamp (comparative swamps), so comparative tropical histories. So, it was Latin America, Asia, Africa, the Middle East and so you studied in other areas. You took seminars that were comparative in their approach. When you went to Minnesota you took that, and you helped to create a similar kind of program at University of Minnesota.

AFI: We were one of the first History of African Peoples Program and then I created a program which is funded by the MacArthur Foundation and the Mellon Foundation called Interdisciplinary Centre for the Study of Global Change. We have had more than 500 graduate students, most of whom come from the global south and it is all interdisciplinary, social sciences, humanities, natural sciences –

BSI: some legal scholars.

AFI: Our premise is that the disciplines are artificial, and they are meant to discipline the mind, that is, to limit questions and limit the

scope of investigations. So, we were challenging, and very successfully challenging, these boundaries that were all artificial. That is another important impact I have had at the University of Minnesota.

ND: In the "Dam Book", James C. Scott is an important...

AFI: Oh, James Scott is extremely important because he is one of the most creative historians or political scientists that I know and he opened the way for me to think about some of these off-stage activities, these things that had been called "hidden resistances". A lot of it comes from the slave literature, but it wasn't hidden to the people who were doing it, they were aware of it. Scott is very important. He opened a way for me to think about history. He would be a very important influence and then, of course, a bunch of neo-Marxist and Marxist scholars, particularly in their critique of colonial capitalism. So, for me, Marxism is a very powerful critique of capitalism but has not yet proven to a be an effective blueprint for how to reorganize society.

DRC: And can I ask you if there are risks in this moment regarding the production of African History in the United States?

AFI: No. There are no risks in the sense that African History is too inconsequential in the United States for scholars who took radical positions a half century ago there were more risks and barriers writing about the history of the United States. And in the last forty years, from 1960 to 2000, there was a move to steer away from Great White Man's history to talk about the histories of African Americans, the histories of women, histories of Latinos, histories of workers, much more inclusive histories. There is now under Trump, but even under Reagan, a big backlash saying that they are really authentic history, which is really about the American Revolution and about George Washington and Abraham Lincoln and all these famous white man and they are giving too much emphasis to people who are not consequential in history and romanticizing people of color and the role of women and, therefore now,

in certain states, writing textbooks, especially high school textbooks, is a very big business. If you get a state like Texas, which is happening, to say the curriculum must cover this, this and this, which is mostly great white men, it means that these other subjects, if they are covered thoroughly in textbooks, won't be adopted. And that is a multimillion--dollar business. So, there is a big backlash from conservatives, first in textbooks, about knowledge production. But then, in a lot of senses, what Trump has done is make all of these into "the Other". Anyone who is not a white male essentially, is "the other" and a threat. And not only white males, but white males mostly from Scandinavian countries are the most important. He always talks about how great things are in other Scandinavian countries. So, Trump frames everything in code words. "Law and Order," which means being anti-black and brown. They are criminals or rapists. Or "immigrants" who are rapist and thieves. And that's Latinos. When we write about their lived experiences and the struggles they had to overcome we are subverting the racist and his allies' totalitarian dream of "making America great again".

BSI: It is an attempt by the far-right and their white evangelical Christians allies to make the world as they like it, in their own image.

AFI: History has become very political but African History is often considered marginal to matters, since so many people still hold the view of the continent as "a backwater and primitive region plagued by diseases and poverty". Africa is not significant. So, it is not dangerous. It gets dangerous only in a very minor sense. But I will tell you a story that is of interest, talking about danger. In 1975 there was a publication written by the Heritage Foundation. At that time the Cold War was at its apex and Africa mattered as a terrain of competition between the West and the East. The Heritage Foundation was just starting as a right-wing think thank and it was not as influential as it is now; one of its earliest publications was a short mimeographed booklet entitled "how the US lost Africa". The first page stated the US was losing Africa because there are left-wing academics, like Allen Isaacman, who are

telling us that these are not communist coming to power. Then they take my quote from my Senate Hearings, the House Representative Senate Hearings. So, the first page is about how left-wing academics are blindsiding or producing propaganda to show how these are not really communist regimes. And that's the basis of one the earliest writing on Africa. That is not explicitly racist but becomes explicitly anti-communist. I thought it was a joke. Just a bunch of insignificant right-wing ideologues with little influence. I was obviously...

BSI: They are indeed just a bunch of stupid right-wing idiots, but they have become very powerful now. They determine who goes in the federal courts.

AFI: History has a lot of power, but Africa is not so consequential now. It was more consequential during the Cold War. But now there is no Russian threat, or Soviet threat or Chinese threat.

ND: And over lunch we were talking about this influence of postcolonial studies. Can you say something about that?

AFI: Right. I think postcolonial studies is very important to the extent that it emphasises reading texts critically and carefully. The problem with post-colonial studies is almost all the texts these scholars interrogate are colonial texts written by Europeans and end up being very Eurocentric. Studying European representations of "the other". And there is not the same emphasis or value put on texts, written texts or non-written texts, produced by indigenous people. Particularly, non-written texts are just ignored, but even written text are not as important as going to the French archives in Paris or to the archives in Lisbon, rather than looking through the early writings of Craveirinha or other early writers and interrogating them in the same way, because they don't matter. What matters is the great works, so in that sense, it is very Eurocentric. So, methodology is important. Some of the questions are very important and the perspective is extraordinarily narrow, in my judgement.

DRC: Are you able to tell us that you both were able to transmit your experience to a new generation?

AFI: I would say that my greatest contribution to African history is that I have trained fifty-three PhD students, almost half of whom have come from Africa, mostly Southern Africa. So, my greatest contribution is creating another generation, and now several generations, who are creating other generations of historians of Africa. And the second significant contribution, apart from the books that we have written, is that we have deposited all our tapes in the archives of Mozambique. I teach my students that their responsibility is to help create an archive, at the same time as they are writing their dissertation. These archives always have to be deposited in national or local archives and when we conduct research the first thing that we tell the elders (local historians) is that we are writing this book but the histories that they share with us are for their children, grandchildren and great children, etc. So, in a sense, creating an archive and keeping alive the voice of the elders is very important. And, as I said in the very beginning, telling the history of those who are in the shadows of history, is critical

DRC: As to your series of books. How many books are there?

AFI: I edited two series and all together there may be 15 books in these two series. It is a lot.

DRC: The two series. The first was with –

AFI: with Heinemann and it was called the Social History of Africa. That was in the 1980s, when we developed a whole field of social history. And the second is Ohio University's New African Histories, in the plural, because by then we had recognized that there was no authentic history but there were always multiple histories. This is very important from an academic and intellectual perspective. Of the same event, two historians could approach them very differently, given their politics,

positionality, the types of questions they asked. So, we recognized that history was really multivocal. That there was not a singular or authentic history but there were always multiple and competing histories.

The Cahora-Bassa book

ND: One interesting question about the "Dam Book"[19] concerns the idea of progress. In a footnote in the book, you try to say that you don't dismiss the idea of development and progress. So what is the status of this term, since the book looks like a big critique of the ideas of development and progress.

AFI: It is a big criticism of large dams. The question always is progress and development for whom. I am not opposed to dams *per se*, because there are small dams that make a lot of sense. But when we look at the impact of mega dams, the consequences are often so negative, almost always, all over the world. And it certainly was in Mozambique because, in this case, the dam was designed as the last major colonial "development project" in Africa, and it was really built to produce energy for South Africa and it was the material basis for the alliance between South Africa and Mozambique.

BSI: And it destroyed the agricultural life, the life of all of the peasants living downriver, because the water appeared not when they needed it for the planting season but whenever there was too much water there or they needed electricity in South Africa. And the result of that was that it ended up flooding a lot of the fields the peasants cultivated.

AFI: The water would be discharged to meet the energy needs of the Apartheid regime, and it could be any time in the year, and it often happened that the peasants had just seeded their fields and the water was discharged again and the roots rotted.

19 Allen Isaacman, Barbara Isaacman*, Dams, Displacement, and the Delusion of Development. Cahora Bassa and its legacies in Mozambique, 1965-2007* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014) [trad. *A Ilusão do Desenvolvimento. Cahora Bassa e a História de Moçambique* (Lisboa: Outro Modo, 2019)].

BSI: Additionally, the peasants downriver lost the nutrients that they needed to produce crops because what would normally happen is that after the rains, the river would flood, would drop nutrients on the land, then water would recede and that would be where they would plant. Well, most of the nutrients were blocked by the dam wall and they didn't go downriver at all, so the land became less viable for cultivation and it destroyed the shrimp industry.

AFI: It destroyed the fauna and flora. It increased erosion because there were no mineral sediments in the water. When rivers are "starved" to drag sediments from the banks of the river, which causes erosion...

BSI: ...And erosion negatively affected the mangroves, which are the plants there in the Delta that the shrimps need. That is where the young shrimp spend the first part of their lives and when those disappeared, the shrimp industry suffered as well.

ND: During your study, mostly dealing with the twentieth century, there was an idea of progress linked to the colonial state. At the same, not only in Mozambique but all around, movements like FRELIMO had their own idea of progress and development too. What is the status today, of that idea of progress?

AFI: The colonial state, FRELIMO when it was committed to Marxism/Socialism, and the neoliberal FRELIMO, all celebrated the dam because they all believed in development and that technology would automatically improve the lives of people. That is not accurate at all. Technology can improve the lives of people; it depends, once again, on which people and for whom and who controls the technology and who makes the decisions. And so, right now, FRELIMO is still committed to many dams and it is planning to build another dam downriver in Mphanda Nkuwa. What that would do is make it harder or impossible to reverse any of the effects of the Cahora Bassa because if they build the dam, which is going to cost several billion dollars, then the owners

of the dam are going to want to have the maximum flow of water. It is possible that by reducing the export of energy to South Africa by about 6% or 7% the sluices could be opened seasonally to mimic the flow of the river that existed before the dam. Now, it wouldn't be the same water because it wouldn't have the same minerals. It wouldn't be as rich, but at least farmers would know when they can plant with security and not have to worry about these periodic floods which come and destroy them. So, you have ways to mitigate some of the worst aspects of the dam. But if you build this next dam, which is meant also, primarily, for South Africa, then this is irreversible. And the question is how much energy does the region need? Because there are several other dams in the region, including the massive dam that it is supposed to be built in the Congo, which would make Mphanda Nkuwa irrelevant. In the end, what is clear is that, even now, the money that FRELIMO gets is not being used to develop the Zambezi valley or to compensate for those lives it destroyed. Because one possibility could be that you invest that money in schools, hospitals, jobs, factories, etc. That is not happening. The other thing that it is not happening is the electrification of all of Mozambique. Right now, about 20% of rural Mozambique is electrified and those are mostly the administrative centers. But just because it is electrified doesn't mean that 20% of the people are using it. Because as in South Africa so many people can't afford to pay for that.

ND: You use James C. Scott's concept of "high modernism".[20] In Scott's work there is a big criticism of the state, which considering Scott's background makes sense, but should "high modernism" function as a kind of total critique of the state? Can we save the state, or at least, some functions of the state and some ideas of progress and development?

AFI: Well, you can have progress. You can have a state that uses technology to the well-being of the people. Technology is neutral. The question is how it is used and for whom. Scott wrote *Seeing Like A*

20 James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State. How certain schemes to improve human condition have failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

State, where he argued that the modern state is inherently exploitative. And, even though empirically he is probably correct, there is no reason why it necessarily has to be the case. So, there is a part of Scott which might be excessively populist or anarchist. But he is one of the major thinkers of our times, even though this work has been criticized.

ND: One of the big arguments of the book is that it is very important to make an environmental history. It is almost impossible to make a social history without making an environmental history.

AFI: You can't. The two are inextricably linked. So that is one of the problems in the discipline of history, the fact that it is divide into politics and economics. In our book we attempted to focus on the social and environmental history, but we recognized it was a specific field of power. We had a look at the state and what it had to say to us, but also at transnational power. The role of South Africa, the role of Portugal, the role of the World Bank... because that creates the structures and contexts in which the dam was built.

BSI: So, to some extent the people who built Cahora-Bassa, but also the people who want to do Mphanda Nkuwa, are required to look at the environmental impact. That is a requirement of the World Bank and that is very common in the United States, and I don't know about Europe, but I would presume that it is common in Europe as well. But what they produced is very suspect (I don't know if suspect is the right word). But they never talk to the people who would actually be affected by the dam. They are supposed to hold community meetings. They are supposed to discuss with the community and hear what their concerns are, and those are considered in determining what the environmental impact is. But, in reality, the only meetings that they had were held in Tete, in the city, and the people who were there were not people who actually belong to the communities and, to the extent that any community meetings were held, people were so intimidated that those concerns were never raised. The environment was not one

that was conducive to people raising their concerns. Consequently, the environmental impact studies didn't deal with any of the real concerns that exist about the real environmental effects of constructing a dam in Mphanda Nkuwa.

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