

TALKING QUEER

Archive, Activism, Creative Disruptions

Hosted by Caio Simões de Araújo

EPISODE 6 - NOTES ON A FIELD UNDER CONSTRUCTION: A Conversation with Nelson Mugabe

Today, I am pleased to welcome my friend and colleague Nelson Mugabe. Nelson holds a Ph.D. in Social Sciences from the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), in Brazil. He is a professor at the University of Rovuma, in Mozambique. Nelson has worked on the anthropology of emotions, humor, gender and social movements. Among other things, we will discuss his PhD dissertation, titled “*A Graça da Disgraça (The Humor of Disgrace): sociability and projects of engagement in the LGBT universe in two ethnographic experiences in the Global South (Rio de Janeiro and Maputo)*”.

Nelson, welcome to the Podcast.

Thank you for having me.

My pleasure. Nelson, let’s start talking about your PhD dissertation. As the title suggests, it is a comparative study. How did you get to this comparative project, between Rio de Janeiro and Maputo?

It was thanks to a recommendation from my supervisor, who asked me to think comparatively about how LGBT rights, forms of social engagement, and political mobilization take place in a different manner in Rio de Janeiro and in Maputo. That’s how this idea of doing a comparative study came about.

And why did you choose Brazil?

Firstly, because I was doing my PhD there. But also, because, as a scholar from Mozambique, it was appealing to me to take another country as an ethnographic case study. Researchers from the Global South tend to go abroad, to study in other countries, but very few take these countries as their object of research. So, when this opportunity arose, I took it.

Nelson, in the thesis you reflect on the difficulties you encountered in doing fieldwork on LGBT issues, since you are a heterosexual researcher. Tell me about this process.

First of all, I must clarify that I use the category “heterosexual” because of social conventions. Because researchers need to situate themselves, I adopted this identity of “heterosexual”, but I do not believe in the representations associated to the term. Of course, this word has a particular history and it is socially constructed. In the Mozambican context, my interlocutors expressed a certain distrust of my self-identification as heterosexual, and many believed that it was a sort of excuse I was using to hide my queerness. In Rio de Janeiro, something very different took place. In Brazil, the question of *lugar de fala*, the place from which one speaks, was a topical issue at the time. Social movements were putting forward a politics of identity that emphasized people who shared the same position. When I revealed my sexual orientation, people told me that it was not my *lugar de fala*, meaning it was not my place to research LGBT issues. In the Brazilian context, the interlocutors I met expressed this suspicion and refused to be studied by someone who was an outsider to their own identity. So that was a big difference.

But this refusal you encountered, it did not let you down, right? It was a creative position.

Yes, it was a creative position. As researchers, we should not be upset when we encounter this refusal, but we must try to understand the reasons behind it. In Rio de Janeiro, we were living in a historical moment in which issues of representation were being raised not only in academia. LGBT people were already speaking, writing, and representing themselves, and so they should. At the time, these debates on representation gave them a prominent space, so they could narrate their experiences first hand. The problem is that in anthropology, researchers have been taught to study, to decipher, “the other”. Surely, this way of producing knowledge needs to be rejected, because it made many mistakes in the past. For instance, it misrepresented indigenous peoples, it misrepresented Black people. And it’s great that now people are speaking for themselves.

Another interesting aspect of your research is its focus on humour and laughter. Why did you decide to frame the project along these lines?

During my research, I noticed that there is a lack of studies linking humor and sexuality. And I felt compelled to think about humor, to question how LGBT people, especially trans people, use and mobilize humor in their social relationships. So, what are the issues that humor raises, in terms of social critique, in terms of morality? What is the role that humor plays in the social life or sociability of LGBT people? I think that the lens of humor allows us to unravel questions that have to do with emotions, with rights, as well as with the types of social engagement that people value in a particular cultural context.

In various parts of the world, we have seen a movement to reject the dominant, Western, LGBT nomenclature. In particular, scholars and activists in the Global South have been trying to look for a local, vernacular, vocabulary to speak of sexual and gender dissidence. In this sense, in your research you use the term *manas trans*. Tell me a bit more about the origin of the term.

This is a provisional term. I don’t think we can completely reject Western categories. What is more productive, from an anthropological point of view, is to think about how these Western categories travel, as we live in a globalized world. We should also think that LGBT people in the Global South do have the ability to appropriate and reframe Western categories in their own terms. In my case, I was interested in how trans people learned the categories they use to name themselves. In the process, I found that Western categories – such as trans women,

transsexual, transgender, transvestites – were taught to them over time. These are not categories that exist *a priori*. In the Mozambican context, it was with the foundation of LAMBDA, as an organized social movement, that we started seeing an institutionalization of the terms used to name sexual and gender dissidents. In the case of my interlocutors, it was through their contact with the LGBT movement that they began to learn the category “trans women”. But I wanted to find other categories they use to call themselves. The category *mana* (sister) is used in Mozambique to refer to people who have same-sex sexual desires, but who express a certain femininity, who are femme presenting. I joined the category *mana* with the expression *trans*, to highlight their dissent in relation to gender norms. So, I use the term *manas trans* to avoid essentializing my interlocutors, but at the same time to show that in Mozambique this question of nomenclature is very new and still ongoing.

Speaking now about the title of your thesis, “the humor of disgrace”. What did you want to capture with this title?

I say the “humor of disgrace” because I found that *manas trans* have an extraordinary ability to face stigma, to neutralize stigma, to neutralize the pain they feel, through laughter. During my research, I noticed that *manas trans* tended to laugh at the sad things that happened to them. It was a survival strategy. Because if they internalized the prejudice they suffer on the streets, they wouldn’t be able to wake up the next day. One of them told me explicitly: “the discrimination we suffer became music to our ears, because if it wasn’t music, we wouldn’t be able to leave the house the next day”.

In this case, it seems that laughter is a form of empowerment...

Yes, it is a form of empowerment and solidarity. But, at the same time, it can also be a survival strategy. What I noticed is that often, in public contexts, *manas trans* mobilize playfulness and humor to go unnoticed in situations in which they could suffer transphobia. In these cases, they use humor to entertain people and, thus, avoid discrimination.

As a Mozambican researcher who has been working in this area of gender and sexuality studies for some time, how do you see the future of trans studies in Mozambique?

There is no field of Trans Studies in Mozambique. There is a gap here. What has dominated the field of sexuality studies is Gay and Lesbian Studies, or research on normative sexualities in general. My thesis tries to fill this gap. But in terms of the existing scientific production, I dare to say that this is not an established field yet.

So it is under construction...

Exactly.

And what do you think are the main challenges in consolidating this field of study?

There are many. We have to consider that here in Mozambique there is the tendency to value studies that have an immediate impact on people’s lives. Research whose main purpose is to produce knowledge is often undervalued. There is an expectation that scientific research will generate returns, whether for the people being studied or for the country itself. So there is a general emphasis on projects that have to do with education, with health, etc. LGBT issues are often seen as irrelevant from the point of view of the country’s development. But even with this tendency, students, and especially undergraduate students, have been interested in these issues.

Nelson, thank you for this chat. I hope your work will inspire other scholars and students to do further research in similar areas.

Thank you, I hope so. The idea is to open doors. The more open they can be, the more productive it will be, and in this way we will contribute further to this field of studies.

Thank you.