
Have the Portuguese and the former colonies overcome their colonial past?

Interview with Lisa Åkesson

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OEm Conversations With 32

February 2023

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Keywords postcolonial migration, north-south migration, Portuguese emigration, Angola, Mozambique.

Título Será que os portugueses e as antigas colónias ultrapassaram o seu passado colonial?

Lisa Åkesson é professora de antropologia social no departamento de Estudos Globais, na Universidade de Gotemburgo. Através de vários projetos de investigação no campo da migração e diversidade, adquiriu uma vasta experiência de trabalho de campo etnográfico em Cabo Verde, Angola, Moçambique e Suécia. Lisa Åkesson leciona e participa em debates públicos sobre questões relacionadas com a migração internacional e a diversidade. Os seus interesses de investigação incluem diferentes perspetivas sobre migração, tais como práticas quotidianas de diversidade, migração pós-colonial norte-sul e vários aspetos da migração transnacional.

Palavras-chave migração pós-colonial, migrações norte-sul, emigração portuguesa, Angola, Moçambique.

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Observatório da Emigração (ahead OEm) – Before exploring your work, we would like to know how you gained interest in the subject of migration. Did it start while you were studying? Did it come later during your research work? Could you tell us a little more about it?

Lisa Åkesson (ahead LA) – Well, it's a long story. I worked with Swedish Development Corporation in Angola, in the 1990s, learned Portuguese and became interested in the former Portuguese-speaking colonies in Africa. When I went back to Sweden, I started working in integration projects in Sweden, with migrants, and became interested in migration. Then I got a position as a doctoral student, and I thought that I wanted to combine my interest in Portuguese-speaking Africa with my interest in migration. In this context, I went to Cabo Verde, because that's the place where so much migration is taking place in the former Portuguese empire. I wrote my thesis on Cape Verdean migration with people who still lived in Cape Verde, but who had relatives and friends living elsewhere. I wanted to see how Cape Verdeans understood the migration project; that is to say, what they thought about migration, what made them want to migrate and not to migrate, and so on. So that was the way it started.

OEm – From what I could gather, you began by working with Cape Verdeans in Cape Verde, but I thought that you work with Cape Verdeans in Sweden as well.

LA – Yes, a little bit. My main interest was focused on Cape Verdeans in Cape Verde, in which I developed my doctoral studies on Cape Verdeans' cultural ideas about migration. Then I had a project on remittances and what they meant to people who lived in Cape Verde and received remittances from relatives everywhere, and later I had a project on return migrants in Cape Verde. So, what I wrote about Cape Verdeans in Sweden was really a very small project.

OEm – Then you move on to study Portuguese in the former colonies, first in Angola, and later in Mozambique. What led to this interest?

LA – It was a coincidence, really, because I was in Lisbon, in July of 2012, and I travelled in a bus that passed by the Angolan consulate in Lisbon. There was a long queue of white middle-class people standing in front of the consulate in the baking sun, so I got off the bus, and I asked, "What are you doing here?" and they say, "We are praying to God that we will get the visa to Angola". And I thought, "Oh, this is a new world": people from a former colonial power who want to go to a former colony in order to get a better life. I became really interested in that and applied for money from different funds. This was really something new in the history of European-African relations. So, it started with the coincidence of passing by the Angolan consulate, while on vacation in Lisbon, and seeing this queue.

OEm – How would you characterise Portuguese emigration to the former colonies? Are there any specific traits to these movements? Are there any differences between emigration to Angola and emigration to Mozambique?

LA – There are many differences. I was in Angola from 2013 to 2015. 2013 was at the height, there were many migrants; in 2014 people started to say “a festa já acabou”. I started with migration to Angola because that was a much bigger migration, many more migrants than to Mozambique, and people had very varied backgrounds. They were highly educated Portuguese, a lot of young people with a BA who just had finalized their studies and who didn't get a job in Portugal; self-employed people who had lost their opportunities to gain a living in Portugal; really poor people – Portuguese who lived undocumented in Luanda, in fear of the police, really poor; and there were also some very rich Portuguese businessmen. So, the kind of people that I met in Luanda were really from all strata of Portuguese society, I would say. Whereas in Mozambique, there were much fewer Portuguese migrants there. Many of them had small and medium-sized enterprises, where they hired lowly qualified Mozambicans, whereas in Angola, Portuguese often worked in Angolan companies, or had rich Angolan clients. So, the Portuguese in Angola were very much more dependent on the Angolan oligarchs. I have characterized the relations between the Portuguese in Luanda as a relationship of hybridity and as hegemonic in Maputo.

OEm – Contrary to what happens in most relationships when people emigrate, Portuguese emigrants in the former colonies tend to have a superior relationship in relation to the natives. Can this behaviour be explained by the colonizing past or do north-south migrations tend to have an influence on this type of behaviour?

LA – I would answer yes to both of your questions. It has to do with the colonial past, but it also has to do with contemporary relations between the global north and the global south. So, it's not one thing or the other; it's a mixture of them. I would also like to point out, as I mentioned earlier, that in Maputo there was clearly a quite hegemonic relationship, but in Luanda, it was more mixed. I met Portuguese people who lived in fear of the Angolan police, I met people who had Angolan bosses whom they had to relate to in a very respectful and sometimes submissive way.

OEm – This led me to talk about racism. When we talk about racism there seems to be two situations regarding the Portuguese in the former colonies: on one hand, in Mozambique, the Portuguese seem to be the discriminators, and on the other hand, in Angola, as well as discriminating, they also appear to be discriminated. Does your research support this theory?

LA – Yes, I would say so. Talking about this to a Portuguese audience, I also want to underline that it's not just the Portuguese who are racists, all of us are in one way or another. The way

Swedish racism works is different from the way Portuguese racism works. I would not say that racism is something that just happens among Portuguese people... there is for instance, an interesting article out now on Swedes in Maputo and how they behave towards their *empregados*, their staff. And is another kind of racism.

OEm: But do you think that in Angola the Portuguese are discriminated as well? They seem to be targeted sometimes.

LA – Yes, it's very multi layered. I met feelings of revenge, understandably, among Angolans who sometimes targeted the Portuguese. For instance, the police, on Friday afternoon, really tried to stop cars that Portuguese people were driving and asked them for bribes. But on the other hand, when I saw relationships at workplaces where the Portuguese were managers of Angolans, there were also cases of racism directed by Portuguese to Angolans. So, it depended, it was very contextually dependent on the situation, whether there was racism from the Portuguese side or the Angolan side.

OEm – It is different from Mozambique, right? Because in Mozambique, it seems more targeted from Portuguese to Mozambicans than from Mozambicans to Portuguese.

LA – Yes, more from Portuguese to Mozambicans. In Maputo, you'll also find the influence from South Africa and from the former British colonies, where there is a really strong history of racism; so, racial relations in Maputo are more similar to South Africa. Whereas in Angola, it's different because it is not influenced by South Africa or former British colonies.

OEm – There are some aspects that appear frequently in your work on Portuguese emigrants. One that caught my attention was the reference to their lack of integration in the country of destination. How can this phenomenon be explained? Does it have to do with the perception of superiority that you speak of?

LA – I'm an outsider. But my understanding is that there is a lack of an open dialogue between the parties. That there are many ideas among the Portuguese about how the Angolans or Mozambicans are, how you should relate to them, how they behave, and so on. And on the other side, there are also ideas among Angolans and Mozambicans about what the Portuguese are like. People talk a lot about these things. I mean, Portuguese talk so much about Angolans being like this, and Mozambicans being like that, and how they should do this, and how they should do that. To my eyes, and of course, there are many exceptions, but on a general level, there is a lack of meetings, of open dialogue between the different parties, and maybe there is a lack of deeper interest in trying to understand each other.

OEm – That leads to the lack of integration of the Portuguese in the former colonies?

LA – Yes, I think it relates strongly because in order to integrate, you need to talk to people, to try to understand how they think, what their lives are like, on a deeper level. And of course, some Portuguese did that, but not all of them. For instance, in Maputo, I saw that many Portuguese moved about in Portuguese circles, there is a strong community centred in the city centre and they met each other and talk to each other and did not talk so much to Mozambicans or have Mozambican friends. In Angola it was different because the Portuguese lived scattered throughout the enormous city and I think it was more common to have Angolan friends. However, I sense that sometimes it was a lack of a real dialogue and a real effort to understand what has happened in these countries since we left. What's going on here now? How can I understand people's lives as they live them now?

OEm – In your work you refer to the concept of “(post) colonial domination” or “(post) colonial hegemony”. Do you want to explain what you mean by this notion and how it applies in the case of Portuguese emigrants?

LA –As I said, the post-colonial hegemonic domination is stronger in Maputo than in Luanda. In Maputo, many of the Portuguese living there, are owners of a small business, they're entrepreneurs or they are managers, and they build on relationships between Mozambicans and Portuguese in colonial times; the labour market structure is the same. So that leads to a hegemonic situation. But as I said, I would not characterize the relationship between Angolans and Portuguese as hegemonic in that sense. There are Portuguese at workplaces who maltreat Angolans, who are in a lower position than themselves and so on. But I would not characterize what was going on in Luanda, between 2013 and 2015, when I was there, as a totally hegemonic relationship. And also, in Maputo, there were instances – as I will talk about in the webinar – when Mozambicans tried to challenge the hegemony of the Portuguese, when they did not accept, for instance, the way the Portuguese talked to them.

OEm – To conclude, do you think that the Angolan-Portuguese or Mozambicans-Portuguese power relations have moved beyond the colonial past?

LA – Yes, I think so. I think especially maybe in Angola; less so in Mozambique. People are aware that domination by white Europeans, like me, is not okay. So, there is another awareness on one hand, but on the other hand, the post-colonial patterns are still very strong. I would say it's both yes and no. There are changes, of course, I mean, it's nearly been 50 years since decolonization. So, of course, things have changed. And I think that we sometimes, in Europe, and in post-colonial studies, we make a mistake when we believe that everything that's going on in these countries have to do with colonialism. Things have changed on one hand, and on the other hand, there are many continuities.

OEm – Is there a topic or question I haven't asked you that you would like to talk about?

LA – I would just like to underline that I'm thankful that I, as an outsider, have had this opportunity to relate to Portuguese, Angolans and Mozambicans. I do understand that my position is the position of an outsider, but I still think that an outsider's eye can sometimes be valuable. And in the same way, I also welcome people who come to Sweden to study Swedish relations to people from other countries.

OEm – Thank you so much.

[Interview via Zoom, on January 9th, 2023, edited for publication on January 2023.]



Observatório da Emigração

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Series	OEm Conversations With, 32
Title	Have the portuguese and the former colonies overcome their colonial past?: interview with Lisa Åkesson
Author	Inês Vidigal
Editor	Observatório da Emigração, CIES, Iscte, Instituto Universitário de Lisboa
Date	February 2023
ISSN	2183-4385
DOI	10.15847/CIESOEMCW322023
URI	

Cite as Vidigal, Inês (2023), "Have the portuguese and the former colonies overcome their colonial past? Interview with Lisa Åkesson", *OEm Conversations With*, 32, Observatório da Emigração, CIES, Iscte, Instituto Universitário de Lisboa. DOI: 10.15847/CIESOEMCW322023

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