

1 Introduction

Peri-urban Areas as the Habitat of the Future

Episode 1:

Once in the street, the Italian seemed overcome by the coolness of the afternoon. The market women were clearing up their goods and an immense peace seemed to be returning to the inner recess of things. Risi sat down in the only bar in town. He seemed to want to be alone and I respected his wish. I sat myself down further away, enjoying my dose of fresh air. People passed by and greeted the foreigner in a friendly manner. Many minutes went by and I asked him whether he wanted to return to the guesthouse. He didn't want to. He didn't feel like anything except to stay where he was, away from his room and far from his duties. I sat down next to him. He looked at me as if for the first time:

Who are you?

I'm your translator.

I can speak and understand. The problem isn't the language. What I don't understand is this world here

(Couto 2004: 25–26).

The opening paragraph of this dissertation originates from Mozambican writer Mia Couto's¹ famous novel *The Last Flight of the Flamingo* (*O Último Voo do Flamingo in Portuguese original*). It plays at the end of Mozambique's civil war, when the Italian United Nations officer Massimo Risi is sent to the village of Tizangara to investigate the mysterious deaths of local United Nations peacekeepers, who have suddenly been blown up. The local Joaquim is the narrator of the story. He is the visiting stranger's assistant and translator. In the quoted scene from the beginning of the

¹ Born in the Mozambican city Beira in 1955, Mia Couto worked as a journalist at the time of the 1975 Independence. Since then, he published several collections of poetry, short stories, and novels of international reputation and translated into several languages Couto 2004: front cover.

novel, he describes Risi's first encounters with the villagers, which are marked by deep frustration due to various misinterpretations and misunderstandings.

Throughout the novel, author Mia Couto links these problems of understanding to the clash of different worlds and cultures, each with their own meanings and interpretations of situations and things. Not only in terms of the differences to the life-world of the European officer Risi, but also in terms of the diversity of Mozambican worlds, such as between generations or between the state administration and the local population.

As in the context of qualitative social research at large, this dissertation's empirical research process was likewise characterised by the interpretations and understandings of social situations. In intersubjective encounters, the researcher and the research participant come together in moments of spatio-temporal immediacy. Afterwards, each one leaves the other to make his or her own interpretations of the encounter. As the second episode from the field aims to illustrate, the initial phase of the empirical research was particularly decisive in this regard:

Episode 2:

The drive out of Maputo's centre was unusually fast. The otherwise busy streets were still empty. It was Saturday morning at 7 am, and the sun was just rising. After arriving at secluded Pescadores beach (cf. photo 1), we had to wait more than an hour for the tide to come in before sailing over to Xefina Island. The two fishermen waited patiently, as they do it every day. We met them a few days earlier when they invited us to accompany them. On the way to the island, I was allowed to take the helm of the boat, and they showed me how to steer it properly. Xefina is infamously known for its advanced erosion, and some old Portuguese fortifications are meanwhile almost entirely swallowed by the sea. We asked them how they perceived the environmental changes and how they would affect their lives. They asked us about the beach in Germany and the fish we would catch there. Later, on the island, we could see the Maputo skyline in the distance, with its modern and ever-increasing office and apartment towers. One of the fishermen eventually said: "from here, the city looks beautiful, but to be there in the midst of it? That's not for me!"

On the one hand, there is the interpretation of my colleague and myself, us immersed in our world of geographical thoughts, asking typical researcher questions. On the other hand, the two fishermen are placed in their everyday life's reality at Maputo's coast, asking their typical fisherman questions. For each of us, the world as we know it represents the reality taken for granted. It is the most common thing for me as a researcher to be curious about environmental processes, as it is for the fishermen to earn a living just by being a fisherman. However, as in Mia Couto's novel, it is not only the cross-cultural difference that arrests attention but also the differences re-