# TRANSCRIPT

## *Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa*

**Why Geographer Bill Moseley Grounds His Work in Real Life**

The Macalester College Professor of Geography shares how his time in the Peace Corps in Mali led to his lifelong love of indigenous agricultural practices, and a lasting interest in what people experience in their home countries. He continued to ground his years of development work and extensive studies in geography and agricultural policy on people's real, lived experiences producing food.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at hkelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Lawrence: Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Since 2018 we've welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters, in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys. Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters, where they spend two days on campus and present free public lectures. We invite you to attend. For more information about Visiting Scholars lectures, please visit pbk.org

Lawrence: Today I'm excited to welcome Professor William G. Moseley, DeWitt Wallace Professor of Geography, and Director of the Food, Agriculture & Society Program at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. Professor Moseley's research interests include tropical agriculture, food and nutrition security, and development policy. He is the author of more than 100 peer review articles and book chapters, as well as eight books, including *Africa's Green Revolution: Critical Perspectives on New Agricultural Technologies and Systems*, *Land Reform in South Africa: An Uneven Transformation*, and *Hanging by a Thread: Cotton, Globalization, and Poverty in Africa*. He currently serves as President Elect of the Mande Studies Association, an organization of scholars specializing in the study of West African society, and he sits on a science advisory panel to the United Nations' Committee on World Food Security. Welcome Professor.

Bill Moseley: Thank you, Fred, it's a pleasure to be here, and I'm looking forward to our conversation.

Lawrence: Bill, I know that you had a formative experience in the Peace Corps, and I want to first take a step back with you and then a step forward through that experience, but what made you decide after you graduated from Carleton College, also in Northfield, Minnesota, not all that far from where you are in St. Paul now, what made you decide after graduating from Carleton to go into the Peace Corps?

Moseley: That's a great question, Fred. I think it links to my study abroad experience in France when I was an undergraduate, and I lived with a family who had spent a lot of time in Morocco, and that piqued my interest in Africa. And when I returned to college I took several Africa related courses, and when I was nearing the end of my undergraduate career I knew I wanted to go abroad again, but instead of spending time in the global north I wanted to spend some time in the global south, and I thought that was the best vehicle for me to do this.

Lawrence: When you do that you don't have much choice as to where they're actually going to land you, do you?

Moseley: You do now, actually, but when I served in the Peace Corps in the 1980s you had really no say at all, and I think I was sent to Mali in West Africa because of my French language skills.

Lawrence: So now tell us a little bit about that experience, first your time there, and then ultimately I want to talk a little bit about the path thereafter, where it takes you to, the doors that it opens up for you.

Moseley: Yeah, it was very much a transformative experience. I initially went through four months of training. I had French from high school and college, but I learned a local language, Bambara, and I had training also in agriculture, in particular in organic gardening. This was in the aftermath of a major drought in the mid-1980s, and food security was a primary concern in the country, so the idea was to work on vegetable production and improving people's dietary diversity. And so I was sent to a village of 200 people, about 60 kilometers from the nearest paved road. I got there and the only other French speaker in town was the school teacher, and certainly my Bambara skills got a workout and I became fairly good at it after a year in that place, working closely with farmers on agriculture and gardening.

Lawrence: How did they receive you, this English and French speaking Westerner arriving in their village?

Moseley: I think it was a mixture of curiosity and suspicion. But I lived with a local family, I ate local food, I dressed in local attire, and I think over time barriers were broken down, and I just fell in love with the place. I think I was just fascinated how under really challenging circumstances people were growing food and making a living, and it has led to a lifelong love of indigenous agricultural practices.

Lawrence: Did you find yourself during that time thinking either, I'm glad I studied this at Carleton, or boy, it sure would've been useful if I had learned some such and such at Carleton, which I never learned.

Moseley: On the one hand you might think a person going to do this should have studied agronomy in college. I was a liberal arts college major studying history. But I actually think it worked to my advantage not to have set in stone ideas about how people should be practicing farming, and I think I was quite open and flexible and willing to learn from local people, and also one when they had questions that I couldn't answer, I knew how to put my hands on resources to answer those questions. And so actually today I tell my students that I think liberal arts college majors, people who have the ability to think critically, are actually quite useful in the development space.

Lawrence: After that, when you went to Mali, I gathered there was not a clear sense of what was going to come after that yet, so at what point did the thing begin to reveal itself and what did it reveal?

Moseley: Towards the end of my service I was thinking about what to do next, and like I said, I was just fascinated with rural communities, and how to improve people's wellbeing, and agriculture. And so I thought I wanted to make a career in international development, and so I came back to the US, I worked for a year, but then I got two master's degrees, one was in international public policy with a lot of economics, and the other was in natural resources management with a lot of ecology and agroecology. And then I went on to work in development for several years, the longest stint was with Save the Children UK, which is a British nonprofit. I was back in Mali with them, but also in Zimbabwe, Lesotho, and Malawi, and then I also had short stints with the World Bank and the US State Department.

Moseley: So in total I worked almost 10 years in development, and towards the end of that time I was having a lot of questions, and I think there were two basic conundrums that I was wrestling with. This was in the 1990s, it was the heyday of neoliberal economic reform, which looked great on paper, implementing structural adjustment policies in a variety of African countries, yet it was creating a lot of havoc on the ground. So these were my conundrums, how do you connect the policymaking community to the grassroots, and how do you allow the grassroots to flourish in the face of incompatible policy?

Moseley: And I was casting about for an answer. It just so happened when I had worked for Save the Children UK I met a lot of British geographers. I wasn't very familiar with geography before this time, like many Americans for me it was about memorizing capitals and maps, and they exposed me to a really different way of thinking, in particular a subdiscipline of geography known as political ecology, which really starts with how the farmer is interacting with their farm field, but recognizes that the way that farmer interacts with the land is conditioned by broader policies. That's when I started my PhD, I think it was questing to resolve these development challenges that I had encountered.

Lawrence: When you said that you thought that geography was about memorizing maps and capitals, that's, I think, what most of us thought. Obviously the field of geography goes

much further beyond that, but why don't we start at that level of abstraction? Give us a good sense of what you think the field of geography is, and how do you situate it in relation to international studies, environmental studies, sociology and anthropology?

Moseley: Knowing where things are is important, knowing the names of places is important, but that is to geography what spelling is to English literature, it's a starting place. What I came to discover is geography is an unusual discipline in that we can't neatly place it within the social sciences, or the natural sciences, or the humanities, it really spans all of those. So very central to geography is thinking about humans' interactions with their environment, both how humans shape the environment and change it, but also how the environment impacts us.

Moseley: Geographers are also very interested in sort of spatial patterns, and not just describing them, but explaining why they are the way they are. Why do a lot of people live here and very few people over there? Or why is the climate this way around the equator and a different way in the temperate zones? Geographers are also very interested in how different parts of the world are connected and how they're influenced by global processes, things like globalization or climate change. So it's really those four pillars: human environment and interactions, spatial patterns, global connections, and the particularities of place that are central to the way geographers study the world, but we're also a discipline that is connected to a lot of other disciplines.

Lawrence: Do you think of it as an applied discipline as opposed to a pure discipline, or is that not a distinction that really holds up for geographers?

Moseley: I mean, I think we're interested in practical, real world questions, but we also understand the value of theory. And a lot of my students' eyes glaze over when I talk about theory, but I think it's important to be able to make generalizations, to be able to predict what we think is going to happen in the abstract.

Lawrence: It's a joke in the classroom, of course it works in practice, but where's your theory? But in part that's not completely tongue in cheek because it may work in practice today, but it may be happenstance or something else may be what's making it work, and hopefully the geographer is one who doesn't just look at the ground in Mali and say, "Yes, corn is coming up today," but is able to make some broader observations about how we're going to make sure people have adequate corn supplies in 10 years, 20 years, and 100 years.

Moseley: Yeah, exactly.

Lawrence: So let's talk a little bit about your field work, which I understand is largely focused in West and Southern Africa.

Moseley: Mm-hmm.

Lawrence: Share with us, if you would, some of your own experiences, maybe a couple of the things that you found most surprising along the way.

Moseley: Sure. So both my master's thesis and my doctoral dissertation were pretty closely connected to my experiences in Mali. I think one of the shocking things that happened to me in the Peace Corps is I went there to try to help to improve people's food security, and at the time the people I was interacting with in the agricultural service were really only interested in growing cotton. And I subsequently came to understand that that had a lot to do with neoliberal economic reform and Mali focusing on cotton as an export crop so that it could pay off its debts.

Moseley: So my master's thesis looked at indigenous agricultural knowledge, local people's agricultural knowledge, which was often looked down upon by local agricultural extension agents, and then my dissertation, and several subsequent articles and a book, looked at cotton production. At the time I was working on it in the late 1990s, a dominant way of thinking about poverty and environment was that poor people were more likely to degrade the environment, and that they were also more susceptible to environmental degradation. So that's what I looked at in my dissertation, and in fact we found that poor farmers were less likely to grow cotton, which was very deleterious for soils. If you use a lot of inorganic fertilizers with cotton cultivation it leads to a problem known as soil acidification and your yields start to decline. And so I was questioning that dominant paradigm in my early work.

Moseley: I then shifted to South Africa after that, in part because I was looking for a place where it would be easier to take students, and going from small scale peasant agriculture in Mali to the Western Cape of South Africa, which is the heart of big commercial agriculture, this is where whites first settled in the 17th century, was a real eye opening experience. And when I was working there I got an NSF grant, a National Science Foundation grant, to look at the land reform program post-apartheid. I then subsequently, with the 2007, 2008 global food crisis, in which there were food riots in a number of African capitals related to high food prices, got interested in urban food security, and my most recent research has really focused on the new Green Revolution for Africa.

Lawrence: Tell us a little bit about the new Green Revolution for Africa, what is it and what is it you're trying to do, and if you think it will or it won't succeed.

Moseley: Yeah, great question. So some of the listeners may be familiar with the first Green Revolution. So this was a concerted effort in the 50s, 60s and 70s to introduce industrial crop production to the global south, so as to improve seeds, pesticides, and fertilizers. Interestingly it was called the Green Revolution because it was seen as an antidote to the Red Revolution, the socialist menace, as they called it at the time, and the thinking was that poor hungry people are more susceptible to communism, and so if they have full bellies you're going to counteract this.

Moseley: That first Green Revolution is largely thought to have bypassed Africa, and so after the global food crisis of 2007, 2008 in particular there's an effort to launch a new Green Revolution that's going to be more focused on African crops. And so I studied a new Green Revolution for Africa project in southwestern Burkina, in particular they were promoting improved varieties of rice. Burkina Faso, as its urban population has grown,

we've seen increasing rice consumption, and a lot of that is imported. So the thought was that if they could grow more of their own rice, they wouldn't have to import as much rice. And in particular we looked at women farmers who were involved in this project to see if it had food security and dietary diversity benefits. Unfortunately it has not shifted the needle on food security or dietary diversity.

Lawrence: Why do you think that is?

Moseley: I think there are lots of reasons for this. One is that it's expensive to purchase all these inputs. So a lot of times you have to purchase them on credit, and women in particular, probably for very good reasons, are nervous about taking on too much credit, so they're hesitant to do this. In fostering this project they also wanted people to buy certain improved seeds and sell them back to the same merchant that gave them the seeds, and often there was a time delay related to this, and a lot of women didn't have the flexibility to wait several weeks before they could get paid because debts were coming due at the end of the agricultural season. And so I think there are certain constraints related to gender in particular that the people who designed the project might not have had at the forefront of their planning.

Moseley: Maybe we need a different model. If your goal is to help the poorest of the poor, the most marginalized members of the community, which often include women, you have to come up with a system that is not as dependent on purchased inputs from the outside. And so I'm an advocate of a different approach known as agroecology. Agroecologists think about farm fields as simplified ecosystems, which our humans are managing to produce certain things, edible crops in this instance, and if you understand those ecological interactions between different crops, between crops and the soil, between crops and insects, you can creatively leverage those interactions to produce more food without a lot of purchased inputs, and I think that's a very pro-poor way to go about solving food security, which is different than the more conventional Green Revolution model.

Lawrence: My instinct, when I look at something that is going to potentially work a major change on some preexisting system, is to imagine that if there's going to be a change, there must be winners and losers, and the winners are going to try to help you, and the losers are going to resist it. Are there losers in this, or can this be seen as an all win set of reforms that you're talking about?

Moseley: Well, I think the losers are the agrochemical companies. What they like about the Green Revolution approach is it means they're going to sell more improved seeds, pesticides, and fertilizers, and with this approach, there's nothing to buy, and so you're not opening up markets for all those inputs. I think the winners in this process are African farmers.

Lawrence: And how are the losers going to be made to either go along with this, or in any event not stand in the way of it?

Moseley: Well, at the global scale, and frankly within many corners of Africa, amongst agronomists, but also the global food security community, the conventional paradigm of

producing more crops using inputs is incredibly strong, it's the dominant discourse, it's resilient, and it's very resistant to alternatives. I have a strong sense that cracks in that wall are beginning to appear, certainly with the challenges related to COVID-19 over the last two and a half years, with the war in Ukraine, I think we have begun to realize that a global food system that is dependent on fossil fuel inputs, that is dependent on a few major areas of the world producing most of the food, is highly susceptible to disruption.

Lawrence: You have written powerfully, compellingly, about the impact of COVID on African food security, so tell us a little bit about what that is and what are the answers to that?

Moseley: The COVID dynamic in the African context is really interesting. So on the one hand, in some parts of Africa you have small subsistence farmers who continued to produce their own food and were relatively unaffected by this crisis. In other cases we have farmers who have become very export oriented, and when we began to see supply chain disruptions related to COVID, they lost their markets.

Moseley: And let me give you one example. So in Kenya, they produce a lot of vegetables and cut flowers for European markets. These are perishable products that were traveling in the cargo holds of passenger planes. With COVID, tourism more or less came to a standstill, the passenger planes flying between Nairobi, Kenya, and Europe almost ground to a halt, and so now they couldn't transport these goods anymore. And so you have loads of vegetables for European markets, you have cut flowers that are just rotting on the docks in Kenya, and of course this means that farmers don't have an income with which to purchase food.

Lawrence: What is the answer? Is that something that has to be treated on an international development level, or can that be treated more locally, regionally?

Moseley: So I'm not going to say that we need to stop all export oriented agriculture. I mean, people do need some income in order to pay school fees, to buy medicines, to purchase clothes, but I'm looking for greater balance. So not completely export oriented, but having some of that, as well as more localized production. And frankly, building more redundancy into the system so that when we have disruptions, people aren't as hard hit.

Lawrence: One of the things I love to do on Key Conversations is to ask our guests to recommend a couple of books for our listeners, this is Phi Beta Kappa after all.

Moseley: Yeah, so I'm going to recommend four books, and these are books that initially exposed me to geography and convinced me that this geographical lens was really useful for thinking about food questions and development questions. So the first is by Piers Blaikie, who's a British geographer, originally a geomorphologist, so a physical geographer who got subsequently more interested in human geography, and it's called *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion*. The second is by Paul Richards, also a British geographer, but he spent most of his career in the Netherlands, works a lot in coastal West Africa, it's called *Indigenous Agricultural Revolution*.

Moseley: And then the third is by Michael Watts, who recently retired from the University of California Berkeley, and it's called *Silent Violence*, and it's about famine in northern

Nigeria. And then a more recent book, it's by a previous Phi Beta Kappa scholar, it's by Judith Carney and it's called *Black Rice*, and Judith Carney's at UCLA, and *Black Rice* is really about the influence of farming knowledge that was brought over by African slaves and turned the southeastern United States into this agricultural powerhouse, in particular rice production.

Lawrence: All good suggestions, and we're delighted to add to our Key Conversations reading list, thank you so much for that. For all the important work that you're doing, when you travel, I hope you travel safely, I hope you come back to us safely, thank you for being involved this year as a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar. I know many, many people will benefit from your wisdom and your thoughts, and from the inspiration of your career path, and I'm so pleased that you sat down with us today on Key Conversations, thanks for being with us.

Moseley: Thank you, Fred, it was a pleasure chatting with you.

Lawrence: This podcast is produced by LWC. Paulina Velasco is managing producer. Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening, I'm Fred Lawrence, until next time.

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