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Course: The History of African Americans at JHU
Interviewee: Dr. Siba Grovogui

[Transcript]

Amisha: Hi my name is Amisha Patel. I am a Public Health major and a junior at the John Hopkins University.

Chrisie: Hi, I'm Chrstie Pridgeon and I'm a freshmen and an International major at Hopkins University

Derek: Hi, my name is Derek Nnuro. I am a sophomore and I am a Public Health and Writing Sem's double major at Johns Hopkins University

The contributions that African Americans have made to the Johns Hopkins University are an important aspect of this institution's History. It is essential that these contributions be documented. Dr. Siba Grovogui has revolutionized the way International Relations and Political Science are taught. This is Dr. Siba Grovogui.

Dr. Siba Grovogui, professor of Political Science to the Johns Hopkins University, was born in Guinea in the northwestern region of Africa. He relocated to the US in the late 80s. A former judge in Guinea, he has spent most of his time here in the US involved in the world of academia. First, as a doctoral student at the Wisconsin University in Madison, and later in 1995, as an Assistant Professor at the Johns Hopkins University. Going into this interview, we knew that Dr. Grovogui was certainly one of the most interesting subjects being focused on for this project. The interview took place in this office in Mergenthaler Hall where I first asked him for a detailed account of his background.

Grovogui: I am actually from part of the country that is always thought of as people who provide labor force. So, in Guinea, people from the forest, forestier, as we say in French, are supposed to be very hard working, smart, honest, etc, but not given to thinking. Um, so, the county from which we come from, for instance in Guinea, is called Nyanko, it's the name of a river actually, there are about seventeen villages, and I am the first one to have a PhD, I was the first one to have a PhD.

Derek: wow

Grovogui. Right. So, um, so basically I am come from the rainforest. I also, because there weren't a lot of schools in the beginning, I actually went to missionary schools. You know, I was educated by missionaries and all that. And, I come from a very large family.

My father had four wives and 27 children. But the ones that “made it “ [quote, unquote,] in school and just upwardly mobile, were mostly of my mother’s children. Of my father’s 27 children, six went to university -- four were my mother’s children; three went abroad--two were my mother’s children. And today my mother’s fifth son is actually the director of the National Labor Company in Guinea.

Derek: The dictatorship of Ahmed Sékou-Touré in Guinea lasted for almost thirty years. I asked Dr. Grovogui how this dictatorship affected his life in Guinea.

Grovogui: Actually, this is an interesting question, because I actually, benefited from the regime of Sekou Toure had in Guinea in many ways and in other ways it has pushed my away. I actually do not like to define African politics always by that which is negative. Sekou Toure, and Kwame Nkrumah, and Gamal Abdel Nasser, and all those people had, really, a project for Africa. And whether you agreed with it or not, they actually had something. And I think that that actually is where one starts, and then one begins to probe where that project went wrong, right? And it did go wrong. But the idea that at independence you had multiple ethnic groups and countries, and et cetera, and that those ethnic groups had to be made, molded into a nation, and therefore you needed a single party state. Every single African country actually believed that was necessary in the beginning, right? So, a lot of African countries decided that to have a single party state system was a very good thing, except when it turned into nepotism, corruption, right? And they lost legitimacy, right? But one thing they gave -again you go to Tanzania, to Guinea, to Zambia, Ghana, Guinea- what they gave was really free education. And that was actually a very good commodity. Today, it actually helped the countries. So, one has to be able to know what was behind that project and one has to be able to properly diagnose what went wrong. Because if you don’t do that, then what we have are all these people running amok in Guinea, Lansana County, who, they make their career denouncing dictatorship. And by denouncing that, and because people agreed with them, we lost sight of the national project. And what we have in Africa today is that in many places there aren’t and that is actually very sad: that everybody is about making money.

Derek: As previously stated, Dr. Grovogui spent time as a judge in Guinea. The question of why he left such a prestigious position is one I had to ask.

Dr. Grovogui: After leaving law school, I started to exercise and my mom really got pissed because every time I, I came home I was unhappy because most of the time I would come home from court and tell my mom that the people who should be going to jail were the ones who were running the country, not the ones they were sending to jail,. So, we were sending the wrong people to jail. So, I stopped being a judge, I actually--and that’s where dictatorship comes in-

Derek: Ok.

Dr. Grovogui: -That I really could not in good conscience exercise judgeship- and this I have to say- by age 27½ I was sitting on the second court of appeals in Guinea. Uh, part of it was luck; part of it was people imagining this wiz kid-

Derek: [laughs]

Dr. Grovogui: -And keep pushing him up and etc. Right? There aren't many people in Guinea who could say that. So, I benefited from it, but at the same time the constraint on being a judge was so great.

Derek: [Mhm]

Dr. Grovogui: Right? In a country to where, basically to make a ruling you have to know who's connected to whom.

Derek: Definitely.

Dr. Grovogui: And so I quit.

Derek: Dr. Grovogui's PhD dissertation, which he completed in October 1988 at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, tackled the topic of conflicting selves in international law, specifically on the effects of colonization and decolonization in Namibia. I asked him how his research interests have changed since then.

Dr. Grovogui: I quit being a judge because justice for me is actually very broad, right? So my entire life has been about writing about justice actually-

Derek: Ok.

Dr. Grovogui: -In many ways. My dissertation, my first book, my second book- now I'm finishing -- I'm almost finished with a third book on human rights. And it's, it's based on Haiti, on the revolution in Haiti. So, justice for me was for everybody in general, but black people, in particular. Uh, the one it was about Namibia, the first one- right- on international law. This, uh, the second book, is about theories of International Relations. It's based on five black intellectuals in France during the Two Wars. And the third one is going to be about human rights, and it's going to be based on Haiti. So, justice through the eyes of black people, not justice for black people, because that's not- not justice for black people, but justice through the eyes of black people has always been something that interested me, and beginning from my place in the rainforest city, in Guinea. So that has not changed. What has changed is the topic, what has changed is how I approach it. Right? And what has changed is the place from which I talk, because there are many things I can say today, which would not have been heard in the same manner if I were not at Hopkins.

Derek: Dr. Grovogui has been quoted as saying that in his teachings he hopes to communicate to his students that each person's world is beyond the environment in which he/she is raised in, and that it extends beyond self-identity. I asked him to elaborate on this thought.

Dr. Grovogui: Oh, actually, um, I teach International Relations.

Derek: Mmmm.

Dr. Grovogui: Um, and there is a, a friend of mine who teaches at the University of Hawaii. His name is Sankra Krishna, and he wrote an article called, "Educating IR", "Educating IR". And the article is now different from the original paper, but the original paper was actually a character he imagined who came to America to educate Americans about what International Relations means. And that character was me, actually.

Derek: [laughs]

Dr. Grovogui: Right? And he wrote that, and I didn't know that; he told me later and somebody sent me the paper. But there is actually an article called "Educating IR" and the first part is really about what I teach and do. Right? And he said that he had this -he's from India, as in South Asia India- And he said that he heard me once to talk to somebody in a room at one of those conferences, and he had this idea that it was really, it was really that our mission, he and myself and all the people from the Third World, to educate Americans about what International Relations means. And this is what he meant: -I was saying, I always said that International Relations, we imagine, International Relations and anthropology have two aspirations. This entity from 17th century Europe we call man -anthropology was to study their customs in the places where they live, and their manners, habits, and etc. And International Relations was to study how those people, from the spaces they inhabit, how they relate to others. Right? Now, what happened is 19th century in England and from 1945 in America is that we understand International Relations to be an extension of US foreign policy.

Derek: Ok.

Dr. Grovogui: Right? And in Britain, and etc., British foreign policy. Right? Now that's actually is very, that's not even a question of -. That actually is wrong.

Derek: Mmmm.

Dr. Grovogui: Foreign policy is a very, very legitimate subject. And the foreign policies of big countries is a very, very legitimate thing to study and pay attention to. Like everybody has to pay attention to US foreign policy because it matters. They have the power, the wealth, and all the rest, right? But, so, foreign policy, the foreign policy of - countries have a space in this discipline, but the discipline itself is not about the foreign policy of America, right? International Relations has its own object and many people including here often forget that International Relations has its own object, that is not about one country, is not about how one country sees itself, is not even about what one country wants. It is about -right?- Values, interests, and norms that can be detected the world over, to which people want to attend. If bettering people's lives is what they want, or if peace and justice and all the rest- I mean those are not, they don't arise from, some -

even if it's a fantasy, it's a fantasy, sometimes even lunacy to think that one country can decide those. So, focusing a discipline, centering a discipline on a country's foreign policy is absurd.

Derek: I asked Dr. Grovogui how he has utilized his desired teaching method here at Johns Hopkins University,

Dr. Grovogui: Um, I will tell you that that my mother used to tell me that I was not supposed to be alive. I was not supposed to be alive. And she meant both literally and metaphorically. When I was growing up in Guinea in the rainforest, from grade one to grade six, a kid in my classroom, not the school, in my classroom died. If it were the rainy season: cholera. If it were the dry season: meningitis. And in between you had malaria. Right? Everything in life conspires against me. And my mother was always telling me that if I, if I really thought that what I need in life is for people to like me I'm in big trouble. So, being liked has never been one of my goals in life. Being fair is, being considerate is, being considerate is, being just is, but being liked is not. Is not. So when I came to Madison, Wisconsin, I decided I was going to do International Relations the way I wanted. And I fought the department to do that. And they told me in the end, "Well, if you do your program the way you want to do it, you will be on your own after that." And you know when I was applying for a job after Hopkins, after Madison, University of Wisconsin, my department in Madison would not open a placement file for me, they would not handle my placement file. Why? Because "I was not a Wisconsin product". That's a direct quote. Because the way I was doing my program was funny. And I told them that I wanted to do this, and they wouldn't understand it -because I came to graduate school when I was nearly 30. I actually knew what I wanted- right? So, when I came to Hopkins there was a very big case of harassment during my job talk here, and I have to say for Hopkins, that the chair of the department then, Stephen David? And the provost, the current provost, who was Dean then, now; both personally apologized to me because one of the senior people in the field of International Relations here at - didn't think I belonged here. Right? But actually I have the letter, they actually wrote me a letter of apology. Right? Professor Flathman, who was at dinner with this guy, really went way over the top, Professor Flathman left in disgust. Right? So, for me the harassment began the day I came here for my job interview. [Laughs] The day I came in. But they apologized, I really have to say that, they wrote me a letter of apology that that should not have happened. But, but right? So people, already people were uncomfortable that I was coming here and, and, and they could actually detect the changing. And since then I have, I have- I cannot change, I mean I, I cannot change. You see that man? Lemuel Johnson? He's from Sierra Leon. He died, he passed away unfortunately. He was one of my mentors, right? He always taught me that you cannot change my dear friend. How can I possibly change? Right? So, basically what it is, is that I find new ways to connect to students, to relate to them, because I have to figure out where they come from. I figure out a lot about America, their education system, and how people think. So I find new ways to connect to them. But, my job is to educate them, right? And so, every now and then a student comes here and says "Do you know you said this in class but I was very uncomfortable?" And I tell them, 'My dear, I am very sorry if you are uncomfortable but you should also know that this is college. You don't come here to be comfortable. You

come here to learn things about the world, and a lot of it is not comfortable. So, my job is not to make you comfortable. But I don't want to insult you, I don't want you to feel bad; it's not about you, it's not that small.' And I actually don't use any demeaning language or even body language to a student.

Derek: I asked Dr. Grovogui how his race has influenced his contributions and achievements here at Johns Hopkins University, and if there are any particular battles that he is most proud of winning.

Dr. Grovogui: I don't want this idea that we should be nice to one another to silence me. I, I actually, I understand that there is a very subtle thing in this "Let's all be nice to one another" that means, "Don't talk." Most of the time. And, that is there, right? Um, so but I'm very, very forgiving of students and anybody over the age of 60. Anybody who's over the age of 60, I don't waste my time with you. And anybody who, who's under 25, I'm more or less tolerant. Because I, I can tolerate almost that you don't know. So even when somebody's being offensive, and I know they are being offensive, I pretend that they are not being offensive, and that, that it's simply that they don't know, so I work myself to a point where I can give them an explanation. Right? But it does. A lot of students have told me here 'You are the first one. You are the first person, black person ever who taught me.' And, and, and as for my colleagues, you detect that. And it comes in multiple ways, right? Look, you'll be sitting somewhere, and somebody is talking about, you know, this person is smart, that person is smart, this person had this book award, blah blah blah. Some of it is very subtle; some of it is very overt. But one of the unsubtle ways in which that comes in is that, you know, people here say that they have very objective criteria to promote, right? "We have very objective criteria to promote". One of them is if you have a prize, if you have a prize-winning book, or you have this, you have that. You are all young people. Google today and see "prizes for Africa" or "prizes for European books", or whatever. Right? If you, if you work on anything that is say...right? Um, say you write about the Holocaust, right? You have a category of book prizes for the Holocaust that is. You have the German Marshall Fund then all these things they give you, you can get that. If you go, if I go down the line I can give you six, seven, eight entries where that book can be submitted for a prize. It doesn't guarantee that you'll have a prize, so I'm not saying that people who write those are not all smart because they are.

Derek: [laughs]

Dr. Grovogui: I'm simply saying that you can enter that book into at least eight different places for a prize. If you write something on Africa, I don't care I'm not just talking about one subject. I don't care what the field is: anthropology, history, literature. All of them combined, there's one prize, called the Herskovits Award, for books about Africa in the English-speaking world. Now, if you submit it to a European something, because my book is about Africans in Europe, somebody, some French snob, will see it and say "Ah, this is about Africans in France, what about France?" Right? And so somebody stands here and tells me "Oh, that guy is very smart, has this prize, has that prize, and

that's why we give them this salary, this raise, this promotion, blah blah, blah, and etc., etc. You just look at them and say "I don't even know where to start-

Derek: [Laughs]

Dr. Grovogui: "Because you don't want to be offensive to this guy who's been promoted as smart, but you don't want to tell them, 'You know, the world is not equal.'" Actually, that person, you know, they are smart [] So, in academia, we find there are multiple ways we hide to sort out how we discriminate against people. And so, either you just forget it, and you say, "Okay, you know, I'm at Hopkins, I have better things to do, I don't want to fight every battle", which you do, but you go to, you know, you go- you cannot call everybody, you know you go to meetings and people –you just say okay, okay, okay. Right? That's not worth fighting anymore, because that, too, will change one day. When I came to Hopkins, I was the only black person in this department and now there are three. And my dear friend, the kind of judgment I'm talking about depends on room dynamic. There is such a thing as room dynamic, which is why I believe firmly in diversity. If you put one black person in the room, it changes what is being said about black people.

Derek: Exactly.

Dr. Grovogui: If you put three, it's even better. And so, when people say diversity, diversity actually really has inherent qualities, it actually...right? It, it, it does anyway. But the other things have to do with; there are just usual subtle harassments. When I came here there was a policeman, one of the guards here, who followed me every Saturday, because I walk on Saturday, following me to the building. One day I stopped at the door, when he came to the door, I said, "Excuse me, sir." I pulled out my ID and I said, "Do you see this picture, do you see this name, you see the name on the door? This is actually my office. [Guard:] 'No, no, I wasn't following you!'" I said, "Sir, I just wanted you to know", and I opened the door and I came in, I mean I wasn't going to argue. So, one day, the dean (I don't know which one of the deans now) we were talking in his office was telling me how do you feel about Hopkins "give me the person's name – I said no, no, no sir – not so fast. That man is actually doing his job, he has family and etc. and that man was operating on mere observation. He's never seen a black person in this work in this building. If he were used to seeing black people here, he probably would not have done that. He was really, so – that's not really his problem that's Hopkin's problem. Don't, don't shift it. You cannot shift that. That's Hopkins problem. If that man knew that there were black faculty in this building, he wouldn't be following me to see where I was going and what I had a key over there. I've been associated with multiple battles, and I think that some of them have been won - like this Africana stuff. Right? The Africana Studies Center, which actually will go to our students not to our faculty because the students for 35 years called for that thing. Um – but in general I would say no actually. I would say Hopkins is a very, very difficult place to change. If its teaching, yes. Students go abroad and they send me cards. There was a student from last year who was in Ghana as a matter of fact, sent me a postcard from Ghana. It says, "You know I'm here, I just wanted to let you know I'm really happy I took your class." And every now and then somebody sends you something to tell you "you know what you

taught me nobody else told me in my life and you were right”. Right? That - I take pleasure in that actually. I take pleasure in the fact that students come here and then they end up going to Africa and come back changed. I actually take pleasure in the fact that people come to my class and say “you know my uncle used to say this and I always knew it was wrong, but...”. Right? Those are good. But I’m also glad that being at Hopkins has legitimized a lot of stuff I do.

Derek: Mmmmm...

Dr. Grovogui: It has given legitimacy to a lot of things I do because when somebody says “Professor such and such from Hopkins” it matters. I don’t know why it should – it mattered now more than it did before, but so that, but otherwise Hopkins itself is a very difficult place to change. And I don’t get that now we are going to have three faculty here because that doesn’t even begin to address curriculum issues and the rest of issues associated with what we teach our students and our relations to Baltimore and a lot of things. It’s ... Hopkins is a very difficult place to change.

Derek: Dr. Mark M. Blyth, Associate Professor of Political Science of the Johns Hopkins University further commented on Dr. Grovogui’s contributions to this institution.

Dr. Mark Blyth: Well, apart from the genius stroke he had of hiring me, um well one of the things that he does and he’s done for along time is his commitment to the institute of global studies which is an interdisciplinary program which is designed to bring people into Hopkins to expose PhD students there. But also to help with PhD training and to send them out for their first taste of field work with the grants that they give to PhD students and to act as an intellectual clearing house for many of the fields of Hopkins in bringing in interesting people and um Professor Grovogui’s been committed to that for a long time and is now currently running it. And that’s an integral part of Hopkins and what we do here.

Derek: Another Associate Professor in the Political Science Department, Dr. Lester Spence gave his thoughts on the importance of diversity to education.

Dr. Lester Spence: In one way if we’re thinking about issues of blackness and what what black faculty throughout the Diaspora bring to places like Hopkins, um one way to think about it is just a straight forward um uh almost vulgar melanin way, like they bring color. Right? There there’s a color that existed on campus that didn’t exist before these guys come. But for me, even as that’s important, what’s really important is the intellectual chops that these people bring to the table. There are things that we specialize in that no one else does and you can’t understand the world around us not the politics not as social movements not as economics not as history without understanding the type of intellectual issues that um that we specialize in. And what Siba brings, that’s what Siba brings to the table. He’s a really, it’s a blessing that Hopkins has someone like him here and we’d be far worse off if he weren’t here, if he were somewhere else.

Derek: I asked Dr. Grovogui for his thoughts on an African American Studies Department here at Johns Hopkins University.

Dr. Grovogui: I should say that I'm ambivalent about a department and am more open to a center, right? And I'll tell you why. This country, as many countries, is not really kind to black people. That I just have to say. If you have an African American Studies degree, and you went somewhere, people would think that you didn't want to be serious in school - so you did that. Right? Then there are many things associated with that. If you have a center presumptively a center can have people in Engineering and Biology, Public Health etc. etc. It really is giving the sort of content to education that people have whether they are engineers, biochem, civil engineer, biochem, health, political science, sociology and etc. There is actually a content that has to do with African that goes into that basket and they go out here as engineers and etc. That I think there are more, I know enough to know that there are more advantages to that so I think if I were to make the argument, the argument I would make is that the center will be allowed: a) to hire its own faculty because Hopkins is not going to hire certain kinds of people who have certain kinds of skills unless we do it through the center. And that has your vote. And if they don't give the center its own lines of faculty then they are not serious, right? But department - I'll be cautious.

Derek: I asked Dr. Grovogui about where he wanted Johns Hopkins to be in the next twenty years and what he wanted his legacy to be.

Dr. Grovogui: I want my legacy at Hopkins to be about changing how people think about knowledge. I don't like the number game. I don't like people to say we have three black faculty. I would be very happy if the people who teach Sociology upstairs come and say to every student who goes through them, "American Sociology is created by many people and one of the first people was [W. E. B.]DuBois, ." DuBois has to be part of that cannon. Right? I want people to say when they talk about the history of the twentieth century to say, decolonization happened. It was promoted by those guys because of what we did. I don't want people to think that, the forefathers of International Relations, to do this and that, and Woodrow Wilson, and etc. etc., and leave out all the people because some of them were actually much more consistent than others. Nelson Mandela changed the twentieth century more than Woodrow Wilson did.

Would you be talking about a doctrine of foreign, International Relations, a Mandelian understanding on the world? Actually Nelson Mandela's understanding of the world is actually closer to what the vast majority of people in the world think outside of Europe. Right? We have to know our world. Social sciences really have to be about us in the world. Not what we in America can get from the world. Right? And we have to know what they have done who the inhabitants of this planet are.

Knowledge is really about how we change our world. Right? And what I hope the social sciences are able to do is actually embrocate in people, we cannot sustain ourselves by continuing to do the same thing no matter how many people we bring and say ok, so your

thing there, and you say it, and we hear it, we forget about it, and we go back to doing exactly what we were doing you came.

Every political science department except for this one actually, right, they have people who do comparative politics of Africa, they have people who do anthropology, right. Africans are humans, they have culture, they have a literature, So Inca gets Nobel so we know they have literature and etc. But you check and see how many Africans can try and teach International Law and International Relations. Because matters of the world, it's Kissinger. Right? So I can't tell you how hard I have to fight to make people respect the kind of stuff I said until recently, it's very recently that in England now people write textbooks and they say no, we have to do postcolonial, have to add Dr. Grovogui, and have something, and etc. But initially people would laugh. And they'll say common, you know. To think black people have something to say about the world or World War II actually took the turn that it took because of black people. Common, you know. It was Eisenhower, and all these people and they had the big tanks and, right. So actually that's my forestation, that you can have all these, you have three black people in this department, no matter what we say, our colleagues here, will still write their books, in political theory, in American government, they will still write it the way they wrote it before we came in here. I don't want young people who follow to do the same thing. It is as if it didn't matter.

So basically, we want to change, at least me, I want to change how we think of ourselves as humans. I don't think of myself, most of the time, as black because I don't obsess about it. But every time someone talk about the world, I say you know what, and this is my last quote, Victor Hugo, a French man said, that the sewage is the conscience of the city. And what he meant by sewage, he didn't actually mean sewage, sewage, he meant the homeless, the down children, the sick, the whatever; they are the conscious of society. What Africa is today, is actually the conscious of this world, whole modern world has been built of gross injustices, inequities, right. Economic systems contribute to that. Political systems contribute to that. Yes, our leaders contribute to that too. But, the fact is that the modern world has been very cruel to black people. Modernity has been very, very cruel to black people.

Derek: After our interview, I told Dr. Grovogui that I was very inspired. He asked me why, but I couldn't give him an answer. When we left, I thought about what I had said and why I hadn't been able to give him an answer. The truth is, what I felt at the end of the interview was not a sense of inspiration. I was overwhelmed. In fact, my colleagues and I were all overwhelmed. Overwhelmed by Dr. Grovogui's intelligence, poise, and resilience. This semester long project has been a true learning experience. Not only have we learnt from our Professor, Dr. Knight, but what we thought was going to be a class simply focused on the process of documenting historical information has translated into a class what has educated us on life. We want to thank Dr. Grovogui for his cooperation, his understanding, and finally, the necessary education he provided Amisha, Christie, myself, and our viewers.

Curiosite Dans La Cite
Odd Man Out in the City

De la luxiriante zone forestière
 From the thick and rich forest zone

Nous est venu gourde en bandoulière
 Came to us with his flask (military) around his chest

Un petit, se bas
 A small, so low

Baptise, SIBA
 Named Siba

Émergeant de la densité des palmiers géants
 Emerging from the density of the giant palm trees

Il étanche sa soif d'iode au bord de l'océan;
 He quenched his thirst with iodine along the ocean shore ;

Savoure sans menottes
 Savors without handcuffs

Les fruits de la cote.
 The fruits from the coast.

Garçon simple