A Science Lesson In Mozambique

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Past midnight. Sebastian is woken from his sleep by a very loud knock on the makeshift wooden door to his reed-walled house. The knock causes the whole house to shake just a bit.

"Sebastian, wake up! I have you binoculars! And I have questions!" Sebastian knows the voice; it's Zeketwo, his host family brother in Mozambique. Even though Sebastian is 31 and Zeketwo is 16, he is the person Sebastian is closest to in his host family. This is in no small part due to the fact that Sebastian's Portuguese is terrible and no one else in the family speaks English but Zeketwo.

Zeketwo is a boy-genius who is curious about everything. If he were an American, he would be taking honors classes in a suburban school, deciding which college to attend on a full-ride scholarship. But's he not American; he's Mozambican, which means he is going to grow up to be a farmer.

That aside, Sebastian can't pass up the opportunity to answer every question he has. Last week, during a thunderstorm, Sebastian taught him about light and sound. This week they're on to optics, thus the binoculars. Sebastian had loaned the binoculars to Zeketwo before heading to bed, assuming they would be a conversation piece the following day. He hadn't counted on being woken up four hours later in the middle of the night with questions.

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Sebastian steps out of his one room house in the backyard. Zeketwo points up to the moon while nudging Sebastian, "What is the table?"

"What?" Sebastian replies still half asleep, "What do you — " That's when he hears a loud crack, like a bullwhip being snapped. Sebastian spins around, now wide awake, to see his host family father whipping a man on the ground with what looks like a long piece of rubber cut from an old car tire. "Zeketwo, what is Father doing!" But the full moon has Zeketwo's full attention.

"The table. Look," Zeketwo insists, pointing at the moon again, "The table." Zeketwo tries to shove the binoculars into Sebastian's hand in an effort to get him to look at the moon through them, just to prove his point. He is un-phased by the sound of the man writhing on the ground just twenty yards away, being asked questions in Chopi, the local tribal language.

Sebastian pushes the binoculars away and repeats his question with more vigor, "Zeketwo, what is Father doing?!"

"In Portuguese it is 'bater', it means 'to beat,'" he replies casually and goes back to looking at the moon through the binoculars.

Sebastian pulls the binoculars down from Zeketwo's face. "Stop looking at the moon. I know what the word is. I want to know why Father is beating that man?"

"Oh," Zeketwo replies, "he is one of men that stole a bag of corn from

Mother last week when she walk home from the farm. Last night Mother saw him with other men in the bar so Father take him and … " Zeketwo pauses thinking for the word he needs, "Kid … napped him. He beat him very much. I sleep in the living room, so I hear all night. Ba, ba, ba! You no hear?"

"No," Sebastian responds soberly, "I didn't hear it."

Zeketwo shrugs nonchalantly. "I hear him all night. Ba, ba, ba! It too loud, so I no sleep. But this not the man Father beat last night; this is other man. He know where the corn is they take." Zeketwo grabs Sebastian by the arm to take him over. "You go beat him, too. Father not mind. His arm tired."

"No," Sebastian responds, pulling his arm away. "I don't want to help whip anybody! In America, we don't beat people for stealing. Why not just tell the police so they can arrest him?"

Zeketwo looks at Sebastian like he has just asked a very dumb question. Deciding it was probably a joke (he never gets Sebastian's humor), he turns back to looking at the moon through the binoculars as there is another crack in the distance that causes Sebastian to flinch.

Sebastian waits for Zeketwo to speak again, but Zeketwo simply looks through the binoculars at the moon. Sebastian concedes the moment and speaks to answer Zeketwo's original question.

"The dark spots that look like a table are big holes on the moon. They are from rocks that hit the moon."

Zeketwo lowers the binoculars to look at Sebastian, "Could the rocks that hit the moon also hit us?" There is another crack of the whip and Sebastian flinches from the sound. He tries to draw focus again to their conversation again.

"Small ones hit the earth all the time. They are the streaks of light you see in the sky at night. Big rocks have hit the earth, too, but you can't see the holes they make because the rain and wind smooth them over. So why

doesn't Father tell the police that the men stole the corn?"

"They pay the police to make it okay to steal from the farmers. Normally it is okay, but to steal from Father is not ok because he works cleaning the hospital. They not know who Mother was, so it was mistake to steal from her. So, why no the rain and the wind smooth the tables on the moon?"

"The moon doesn't have rain or wind to smooth over the holes. So, — "

" — but how do you know the moon no have rain or wind?"

"Because Americans went to the moon 30 years ago."

Zeketwo looks at Sebastian squinting his eyes to determine if this is a joke. After a short pause he decides it's probably not and goes back to looking at the moon.

"We also have big binoculars, bigger than the house, to look at the moon very closely. So, what if the men tell the police Father beat them?"

Zeketwo continues to look through the binoculars at the moon while speaking. "Father is important, so they cannot tell the police." Zeketwo looks from the binoculars to Sebastian and, seeing for the first time just how perplexed he is. Zeketwo knows instinctively it is his turn to be the teacher.

"Father no like to beat the men, but in Mozambique the police do nothing. It is normal in Africa, I think. If Father do nothing then other people will know it is okay to steal from him, so more people will steal from him who are too lazy to work. These men will work on the farm next week to help Mother, then everything is okay again."

Sebastian didn't know what to say. There was another loud crack. "Um, I don't know, Zeketwo, I don't know. I think, maybe — "

" — Sebastian??

"Yes, Zeketwo?"

"Tell truth, has America really go to the moon?"

Thank you for your time. God bless you, and God bless America.

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Discussion Questions

1. Is Zeketwo's father doing something wrong by acting as a vigilante and taking the law into his own hands?
2. Does it matter that only a single bag of corn was stolen? While it has importance, the family is not on the brink of starvation and can survive without the extra food.
3. Does Sebastian have the right to be offended by what he has seen? Does he have an obligation to tell the American exchange organization?
4. Would it be wrong for Sebastian to help out the family by assisting his host father in whipping the thief? If the thief attempts to run away, does Sebastian have an obligation to help the family catch him?
5. Does the fact that the police "do nothing" make the violence permissible, or is this kind of extreme violence (*being whipped with a piece of cut up car tire*) never permissible?

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