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INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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First Impressions

Mr. Peter Bird Martin  
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Dear Mr. Martin,

Mariano Cassamo is a man obsessed by candonga. He hates and fears its practitioners, whom he feels are directly responsible for his inability to get milk for his little niece or a pack of cigarettes, yet he needs them. For although Mariano Cassamo is a FRELIMO Party member and a scientific socialist, he and the nearly one million other residents of Maputo can't get by without candonga. The state press is shrill with it, and the city's collective imagination feeds on its magic; it is the trace of a matrix of disappointment, deprivation, mob hate and covetous desire.

Candonga is the black market.

Siyad Siddik is a candongueiro, a black marketeer. He is such by necessity, for having been raised to barter, truck and higgler in this formerly bustling port city, commerce is his way of life. Since most trading through other than state channels at fixed prices is now illegal, Siyad is a de jure "economic criminal," subcategory candongueiro. He has adapted to the new system, although he doesn't like it, and has learned to use it to best advantage. We sat on the stoop of an empty shop one evening, while upstairs his elder brother, Abdul, struck a deal with a Ministry of Defense official to have the contents of the family's Nampula warehouse (way up north) flown down to Maputo by military aircraft at nominal expense. "I have so much stuff up there," Abdul later explained, visibly grieved at the thought of his merchandise sitting idle, "but I have no transport. I've got a warehouse of pillows, and you can't pillows in Maputo." Siyad nodded assent.

Only in Maputo and in morality tales do there exist in such close proximity men whose world views are as antipodal as those of Mariano Cassamo and Siyad Siddik. The former is as close as the ruling FRELIMO (Front for the Liberation of Mozambique) Party will come to realizing the "new Mozambican man." The latter is timeless, and as such is bound to survive the youth of the former.

My introduction to Mariano Cassamo lasted three and

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one half-hours. I am his charge for the duration of my stay here, so I suppose it was reasonable that we plunge into acquaintance. Sr. Mariano is the Director of the Information Ministry's Foreign Press Office. He is a new FRELIMO Party member and, aside from his schizophrenic attitude towards candonga, a true believer.

He rose from behind his desk to greet me, allowing himself only the faintest and slightly twisted smile, and offered a hand with the long, tapering fingers of a pianist, no callouses. He is a young black man, perhaps 26, with close-cropped hair and beard, delicate features and skin tone which give him an almost Mediterranean appearance. In retrospect, his face recalls the Roman portrait of an Egyptian boy, with large, brown, soulful eyes, I once saw in a museum.

He seemed ill at ease and questioned me sharply about my credentials, acting the bully: "what's this ICWA," "why are you interested in Mozambique," and so on. He stared distrustfully and spoke in short bursts, appending to every other sentence a strange, abrasive, interrogative sound, "Nheh," (which I take to be a corruption of the Portuguese "não é," i.e. "isn't it so"). But as our conversation proceeded, it became clear that he was less in control of the situation than his severe manner might suggest, and that the rough treatment was in keeping with the principle that the best defense is a good offense. He is out of his depth on questions that require the confidence of a personal opinion.

Hence his recitation of the Party catechism, beginning with a two and one half-hour history of Mozambique since independence from Portugal in 1975. Now and again I interjected a question, which usually confounded him and set us back six months as he remembered milestones he had forgotten to include, and so I desisted. On he droned, through the Lusaka accords, through Zimbabwean independence, determined to slog through the Fourth Party Congress in all its ramifications. Finally, he concluded with another denunciation of the "bandidos armados," or "armed bandits," the Party sobriquet for the freedom fighters/ rural brigands, depending on one's point of view, also known as RENAMO -- Resistência Nacional Mocambicana. ( I prefer the tag of a charming American cooperante who calls them "those ban-dee-dohs.") It was my turn to speak, and I asked him about himself. Like many others in the intermediate levels of the bureaucracy, Sr. Mariano was taken out of school to staff government offices. He had been training in electric appliance repair when called into service, and professes to hate pushing paper behind a desk. But in a country in which at independence 95% of the population could not read or write, literacy is much in demand. So Sr. Mariano, a Party member for just over a year now, serves.

Resolute an enemy as he is of candonga, Sr. Mariano did not offer to change my dollars into meticaís (the national monetary unit), a highly illegal transaction, until our second meeting. He broached the subject clumsily, not yet expert enough to affect nonchalance. The only place

in Maputo to buy milk for his niece, he explained, is the Interfranca -- the hard currency store. Various tales of woe, all of them true to a greater or lesser degree, have since been told to me by Mozambicans anxious to trade meticaais for dollars or South African rand.

To get into the Interfranca in the afternoon, you have to show your passport; Mozambicans with hard currency may enter only in the morning. Outside the entrance is a crowd of blacks watching mostly white foreigners enter this forbidden fantasy and emerge with shopping bags of potatoes, beer, ravioli, meat (meat! meat! the shops here haven't seen meat in nearly two years!), all the grocery items of which all but the inner circle of the government can only dream. It is a surreal experience to pass in an instant from penury to plenty, from the dazzling afternoon sunlight to the fluorescent cool of a modern supermarket, complete with muzak. And it is highly embarrassing to carry an exposed loaf of bread through the streets. Never again will I neglect to bring my "United States of America Corn" bag, made from empty emergency food aid sacks and as plentiful in the old bazaar as food is scarce.

A very few residents of Maputo outside the inner sanctum of power manage to eat quite well without exhausting a miner's remittances at the 'Franca: Siyad Siddik is one of them. Siyad, age 23, and brother Abdul are Indians, acknowledged masters of local commerce on the East Coast of Africa. They are the two brothers delegated to remain behind to protect the family's assets in Mozambique; their parents and siblings are in Lisbon.

Siyad may be the living human closest to Joseph Schumpeter's "capitalist" ideal-type. He is a Moslem, but by his own admission not one to dawdle over matters spiritual. What makes his eyes burn bright is money -- not only as an end, but as a means, or more, as a way of life. "I move millions," he boasted as we walked to his family's home for tea, "not hundreds or thousands but millions of contos.\* I'm talking about a lot of zeros, a whole lot."

Since there are no more functioning cafes in Maputo, Siyad and I sat on the steps of an empty shop in the dark, and talked. What did I think of all this, he wanted to know. I was circumspect -- too early to tell, I said, but the present state of Maputo was tragic. And the evidence paraded before us: children in rags, some with swollen bellies, scores of men shuffling up a queue for cigarettes, hundreds more waiting

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\* One conto= 1000 meticaais (sing. metical). One dollar fetches 42 meticaais at the bank, up to 2000 in the free market. But watch out -- those convicted of "economic crimes" are subject to chicotada, a public flogging. I asked Mariano Cassamo whether this was not disturbingly reminiscent of brutal, colonial practices. He explained that whereas the Portuguese beat workers and freedom fighters, the current regime beats only "enemies of the People." La plus ça change, nheh?

in the dark for a bus. The skyscrapers are blacked out, the clerks stone idle behind empty display cases. What was obviously an economically dynamic society is going rapidly to ruin, and can one hardly walk down the street without wanting to rage at it all, and fix blame.

Siyad and I talked about coping in Maputo, about the possibility of change and the guerilla insurgency. "Violence is for brutes," he observed, "who can't use their heads to get what they want." And here the remark that recalls Schumpeter's contention that the true capitalist self-interestedly favors peace as necessary precondition for commerce: "War wastes so much good materiel." And now, while on the subject of distinguishing the brute from the subtle and the common from the sublime, our talk turned to the dollar. In Maputo today, the dollar commands that place in the popular imagination reserved for virility potions and theological mysteries. It is spoken of with awe, for the transubstantiation of currency into prized edibles such as sausages and custard can only be effected through our omnipotent medium of exchange (or the lesser rand). "The dollar," Siyad explained in an unlovely but apposite metaphor, "is sugar. Now imagine we are ten rats in a room -- no, one hundred rats in a closed room all together. We all head for the sugar, and we kill for it."

In fact, that people are generally not at each others' throats in Maputo is remarkable. There are more burglaries and car thefts than a year ago, but people attribute it to the lack of streetlights rather than greater desperation. Until quite recently, Maputo never lacked electric power, produced in quantity at the Cabora Bassa dam in Tete Province. The guerillas, however, have made the relay towers carrying the high-voltage wires a favorite target, and the city is coping by rationing the power of its coal-fired back-up generator. People here are very used to electric light at all hours, and the psychological impact of these regular blackouts is considerable. But for all its difficulties, Maputo is still a functioning city. The sewers are backed up in only a very few places, the telephones work about half the time and the streets are swept clean. The housing stock is badly decayed, but there is no neighborhood as far-gone as the South Bronx. Form and function, however, have parted ways, and the style of life in the city is getting progressively closer to that found ten minutes beyond the downtown, in the African bairros, or neighborhoods, of straw huts. For example, high-rise balconies are most often used for cookfires. Saturday morning saw a steady trail of women, bundles of firewood balanced on their heads, trekking into town and up to the "People's Market," where their cargo is chopped into manageable size. They dump their loads and stand chattering in the shade, sometimes breaking into song, while the men swing axes. The observer could well be in the market of any provincial town, and the incongruity of 20-story buildings on three sides is striking. The heart of the city is going back to the bush.

People don't get very much to eat here. Two and a half kilos of rice, half a kilo of sugar and half a liter of cooking oil per person per month is the standard ration. Stocks run out towards the end of the month, as demonstrated by the state of our "Continental Breakfast" at the hotel, which has become less European and more African as the month winds down. Two biscuits and tea yielded to one biscuit yielded to boiled manioc. Most everyone supplements his allotment at the neighborhood cooperatives, which sometimes have something to distribute, and the rest of the month's food is had by grace of candonga.

As a consequence, people haven't much energy to work or, for that matter, tools and materials to work with. Nevertheless, at least two businesses are thriving in downtown Maputo. One is shoe-shining. One third of the city seems perpetually to be shining another third's shoes (while the remaining third goes barefoot). The other business is the local penny "tell your weight" scale. Little knots of people pump their worthless meticals into the machine without pause, jumping on and off in various combinations and laughing delightedly. At first I thought they were weighing themselves out of concern for the effects of their meager diet. But why weigh yourself five times, even if you can interpret the result? No, the scale has a clear glass cover, and what fascinates its patrons is watching the smooth, grey weights rise and fall with unhurried noblesse. The children trace the trajectory of the arrow with their fingers, shrieking happily as it glides around the circumference of the glass. Elevators may be stopped, refrigerators useless, cars and trucks idle and rusting for want of a part, but the penny scale preserves intact. It is a window on the soul of a living machine, and a rare spectacle for a city accustomed to grinding entropy.