

ICWA LETTERS

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Recife Reflections

RECIFE, Pernambuco, Brazil

November 15, 1999

Mr. Peter B. Martin
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Dear Peter,

Certain sounds mark the passing of the day in my corner of Recife. The tinkling of a little brass bell and the call "*lay, lay, dez!*" (Short for *picolé, picolé, dez centavos* — popsicles, popsicles, ten cents!) signals that João, a tall, withered man in his late fifties who looks 80, is hobbling through on his one good leg and the stump of what is left after a botched amputation. Dressed in long pants and a button-down shirt, he works from a Styrofoam cooler hung from his shoulders on a piece of ratty sisal.

By mid-morning comes the clanking sound of metal sticks banging against 20-liter tanks of butane gas wheeled along the street in old shopping carts, or bungee-corded to the handlebars of bikes. The more upscale gasmen operate out of brightly painted flatbed trucks and announce their arrival with snippets of music reminiscent of "Space Odyssey 2001" and lend forlorn background music to the street. By evening I am listening for one of my favorite sounds: men pushing wheelbarrows filled with fresh *macaxeira* (ma-ca-SHARE-ah) root and calling out, "SHARE-ah, ma-ca-SHARE-ah!" They stand at the base of apartment buildings hoping to catch the ears of cooks and housewives above.

We live in the neighborhood of Boa Viagem (Good Journey), sandwiched between the airport on the west, the Atlantic on the east, the well-off enclave of Piedade to the south and miles of traffic heading into downtown Recife to the north. It's a busy neighborhood filled with apartments, houses, schools, shops, businesses, police stations, etc. Arriving here, we quickly learned that to rent an apartment with the minimum of furnishings (light fixtures, a stove, refrigerator and toilet seat) meant we would be relegated to the Boa Viagem area where seasonally rented apartments are more easily — and cheaply found.

Our new, 30-something friends scoffed at the very idea of living in Boa Viagem. It was an insult to their intellectual sensibilities. Tisked one, "Boa Viagem is pure middle-class drama." But, knowing our work would tend to pull us toward time with Brazilians at the lower echelons of the economic scale, living in a middle class environment didn't seem as limiting as our two-car, computer-equipped, university-educated (in short, *decidedly* middle-class) friends feared. We rented a two-bedroom apartment close to the beach in a building filled with young families and a few retirees. Two blocks from our building is the *Praça de Boa Viagem*, a city-block-sized patch of cement

that hosts a small park, a two-man police station, a Catholic church and a nightly neighborhood art and food fair.

While a great deal of the area is filled with condominium towers and houses with garages, the idea that the middle class has some great hold on Boa Viagem quickly melted away as we got to know the area. Holding up the middle class and tourist industries are the working poor and destitute who, like João and his popsicles, the butane men or the *macaxeira* (manioc), vendors, live in shacks crammed into shadows of condo towers.

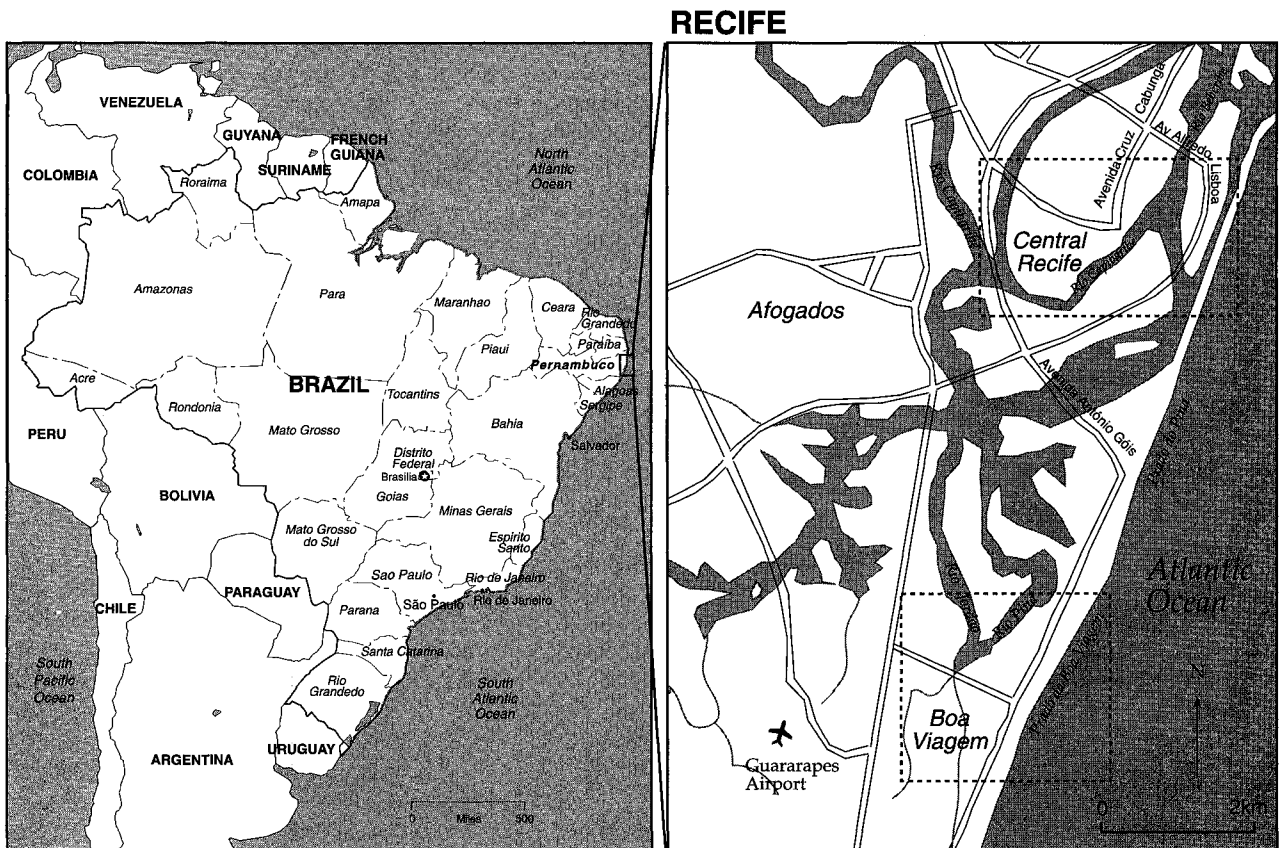
It would be tempting to label these vendors and others — the cardboard gatherers; the men who stand all day in the sun guarding parked cars for change; the kids who weave in and out of traffic to sell fresh beans, pineapple or gum to motorists; the shoeshine boys who work the fair and beachside crowds at night; the old ladies selling cleaning rags at street corners — with the common moniker “informal,” referring to a part of the economy that operates outside the regulated, taxed and benefit-receiving mainstream. But I think the term “informal” has become so common that the co-dependent link between those in the towers and those in the street has become obscured.

Where else does one find fresh herbs for a medicinal tea when living without a garden? At the herb man’s cart across from the Chinese restaurant, of course. Need your

chairs re-caned? Two blocks down from Pizza Hut a man and his sons have set up shop in the shade of a Jacaranda tree. They do beautiful work. (I recently watched their progress as I passed on a daily bus route as they re-caned a divan regal enough for Cleopatra.) Need something hauled? In less than five minutes it’s possible to find a man with a truck, a horse and cart, or cheapest of all, a man on foot pulling a cart, to carry your load. With all of these services available and counted-on, it’s hard to see these people as “informal.”

“Integral invisible” might be better. While they pay no taxes and have little overhead, they are part and parcel of daily life. The price they pay for this is high. They earn no credit toward retirement pay, rely on an understaffed and under-supplied public health system and rarely get beyond subsistence standards of living.

My friends in poorer neighborhoods are fond of saying that the “rich” want to keep the poor where they are. If the poor get too smart, too well-off or too capable, the rich will have to share the spoils and, injury upon injury, no one will be left to sell them services and goods at below bargain-basement prices. Brazil is in no danger of losing its working class, poor or “*miserables*” — the name given to those with less than nothing. Even if all Brazilians were able to triple their annual earnings there would still be those desperate to work for the most mea-





Waldeson's father and uncles push their fishing boat out to the surf. They hopscotch their way down the coast from Olinda to Peidade every two weeks leaving their boat and gear in at a different point each night. But they've been doing it for so long that local residents, the same who buy the fish they haul, keep an eye on their boat at night. When Jorge, the patriarch of the family, started fishing in the area 50 years ago the coast line was dotted with weekend getaways and small bungalows.

ger salary, or to sell their talents for the cost of a next meal.

There's a complicated truth in the sentiments of my friends. The goods and services provided by the working poor (across and within economic classes) are tightly woven into the daily fabric of Brazilian life. Oddly, all of this started to percolate in my mind one lazy Sunday morning several months ago as Tyrone and I sat on the beach across from the plaza.

* * *

Recifenses boast that *Boa Viagem* is Brazil's most beautiful urban beach. It's hard to argue otherwise when low tide coincides with early morning hours, forming beautiful saltwater pools between the sandy shore and the coral reefs. Of course, *Cariocas* (residents of Rio de Janeiro) would turn up their noses at the very idea of another beach besting Ipanema or Copacabana — but that's what makes them *Cariocas*.

On Sundays the brutal Pernambuco sun draws a cross-section of Recife's population to the cream-colored sands and melts them into one democratic, oil-lathered mass. Sun lovers arrive by bus, bicycle, on foot or by car.

They pour out of the guarded towers and amble over from the *favelas*. By 8 a.m. chairs are filling up and the sounds of ecstatic children tossing in the water echo off the walls of the cement high-rises as far as three blocks away.

Now and then, when Sunday morning rolls around Tyrone and I slip from bed to beach. With just towels and 10 *reais* (about five dollars) tucked into our suits we weave our way down the street where for a buck we nestle into beach chairs and grab a piece of shade under a big umbrella.¹

There we settle for a few hours of intense wave watching and relaxation.

The most striking aspect of the beach in Boa Viagem is its resemblance to an open-air market. An incredible number of vendors wind up and down sections of the beach, hawking everything from food and souvenirs to cheap water toys, dresses and sunscreen. Their skin is sunburned-brown. Their ages range from ten to 60 years old. They walk the beach calling out their specialties.

Favorites of ours are teenaged boys who carry cool-

¹ For this newsletter I am using the conversion rate of 1.9 *reais* per U.S. dollar.

ers of fruit salad and an elderly man who sells inch-high hits of deliciously strong coffee. Once we're acclimated to the idea of being awake, fresh *agua de côco* (coconut water sipped from a chilled coconut) and seafood start to look tantalizing and we keep our eyes peeled for the women passing with laundry tubs of limes and steamed shrimp balanced on their hips. Inevitably I succumb to the pitches of the boys selling roasted cashews from the 30-pound bags hiked onto their shoulders. They dole them out at a dollar per beer-glass full — with extra salt for free.

The crowd is a mixture of economic levels. Children in worn underwear bounce through the waves next to adults sporting designer sunglasses and boutique-brand bathing suits. Tourists cluster in front of hotels. Vendors wind patiently through chairs, dodging sandcastles and makeshift soccer games. Knowing timorousness can kill sales, they never take the first “no” for an answer and approach right to our toes showing off what they have to sell, even offering taste samples on slower days.

Buckets of raw oysters pass, followed by fresh sandwiches, hot lunches in carryout tins, coconut candies, popsicles, old-fashioned candy sticks and puddings. Men walk by yoked under poles laden at either end with bags of boiled peanuts, toasted almonds and quail eggs. Some work from carts such as the hotdog vendors, the pineapple men and the rambling barkeeps that mix potent drinks as they push wobbly contraptions through the sand.

Hotdogs sell from sunrise to well past midnight. During the daylight hours dogs are served up from the rolling carts in the sand. By night the culinary action moves to the broad sidewalk, alongside which park hatchback cars outfitted with sleek stainless steel mini-kitchens.

Either way, dogs are a hot sell — or rather, served cold with traditional bun, ketchup, mustard and onions as a base. But the Brazilian touch comes next with a topping of canned corn, peas, mayonnaise, potato sticks, fried fat back and sometimes ground beef. Some customers even request a little flourish of condensed milk, just to finish it off. With a cup of soda thrown in it's a hearty meal, all for less than 50 cents. In fact, it's hard to spend more than three dollars even on a gluttonous outing.

But I always save room for *Caldinho de Jane*. There is a tradition in Pernambuco, and I believe in other northeastern states, of eating *caldinho* — a thick broth served piping hot. The broths are most commonly of fish, shrimp or bean but many other inventions exist. Most days *caldinho* can not be found before the evening hours when Brazilians start to think of a light dinner. But on Sundays *caldinho* can be found on the beach. It walks right by.

Caldinho vendors are easy to spot by the mesh bags they carry in either hand. One is filled with giant thermoses of broth, the other loaded up with the necessary condi-

ments of quail eggs, peas, bacon, olive oil, *malageuta* pepper sauce, garlic sauce and cured olives. I have become a devotee of *Caldinho de Jane*. Her broths seem to be so much lighter and delicately seasoned that I settle for no other.

Jane is a real person. She's rises early Wednesday through Sunday and gets the kettles boiling. She then loads up three sets of bags and sets off by bus to the beach with her husband and nephew. They spend their days walking up and down the beach hoping to sell all of the broth Jane made. It goes for 50 cents per cup. In theory, if they sell it all they can gross \$69 in a day. That seems like a lot initially, but then subtract the costs of the condiments, broth ingredients, transportation and her nephew's salary and there's not much left — about \$47 on an ideal day. Most days are not ideal.

Jane, her husband and hundreds of other vendors are part of the beach economy. Just as the sun-lovers flock to the hot sands, so follow those hoping to cash in on a captive market. There's plenty of room for an enterprising (or desperate) businessperson since the city or private establishments provide few services. The set-up begins at sunrise as hundreds of the self-employed and their employees pull wooden carts stacked high with umbrellas and beach chairs from rented storage places — often the stockrooms of grocery stores or bars. They wheel their cumbersome loads to the boardwalk and down slippery ramps to the sand where they set out a few chairs and await the arrival of passing tourists or regulars.

Most charge nothing for the chairs and shade and hope their hospitality will mean higher beer and soft drink sales. Elisangela — 25, petite, energetic with coffee-colored skin and a dazzling smile — has been working the beach since she was seven. She and her two sisters began tagging along with their parents 12 years ago when her father, José, scraped together a cooler and a half-dozen sodas to sell after losing his job in a tile factory. Because the road along the beach is primarily residential, there are few restaurants or even snack stands. José, creating enterprise from need, saw an opportunity at the beach. He rigged a little stove on wheels and he and his wife began serving freshly fried fish to customers who wanted to stay for the day.

As the girls, then 9, 11, and 13, grew more competent (and attractive) their responsibilities increased until they eventually became the “waitresses” and their parents remained in the background, keeping the food humming and supplies fresh. The area became known as the “*barraca das tres meninas*” (shack of the three girls) as beach-goers improvised a name in order to designate the area as a rendezvous point.

Today José has a truck in which he can haul beach chairs, umbrellas, coolers and even the stove. Painted on the side in bright red letters is “*Barraca das tres meninas.*” José, his wife and two younger daughters run their little



Diana, 15, hauls a homemade cart stacked with beach chairs and umbrellas as her mother Debora follows behind. Deborah and Diana have been a team on the beach since Diana was eight years old. They're not as established as José and his daughters, but, says Debora, they make enough to eat, have a house and stay healthy.

section of the beach seven days a week, rain or shine. "Since the beginning I've come here everyday. Some days I sold nothing. But after a little time people knew to find me here for a cold drink. Then fish. Then the chairs. And little by little..."

On a good day José keeps all of his 140 chairs filled as customers rotate through, spending an average of 3 to 4 *reais* each. He estimates his income to be between 8,000 and 9,000 *reais* (U.S.\$4,210 to \$4,740) annually, after costs. Two daughters live at home while attending university (one in tourism, one in public relations). I asked him if he feels he and his family are part of the Brazilian middle class. José paused for a minute and looked around him. "Business is good now, better than last year when it was expensive for tourists to travel. Now Brazil is a good deal. We make enough to live and even save. But my savings are for the weeks of rainy days in the winter, and for the next time the economy gets hard. We're still poor. We can't stop working."

Elisangela works a nearby section of the beach with her husband, also named José. They married two years ago, split off from her father's business and have been hustling to make ends meet ever since. They have 60 chairs. When customers want fried fish Elisangela pays her mother to fill the order. She herself doesn't like to serve fried fish because she's too nervous about random health-department inspections.

It isn't exactly clear whether it is illegal to cook on the beach, although in the last several years the health department has gotten stricter. Three years ago, after a stove a woman left on the beach blew up, the city passed an ordinance prohibiting storage of equipment on the beach. Shortly afterward cleaning fish was outlawed

as well, in an effort to make the beach healthier and reduce the rat population. A violation of the ordinances or unsanitary conditions can mean the immediate confiscation of a vendor's property and heavy fines.

Elisangela wants the City to do more, but concedes she and other vendors have little recourse since they pay no taxes, are not required to get licenses and do not have to rent beach space. Cutting overhead even further is the trademarked equipment that companies distribute along the beach, *i.e.*, Brahma beer umbrellas, Pitu grain-alcohol coolers, Kibon ice cream insulated push carts, Antarctica beer huggies, etc. Even McDonalds supplies trash bags. All very clever ways of taking advantage of "informal" advertising.

Vendors realize they fill a need in the beach market and are an integral part of the tourism industry in Recife. What they make in a day is theirs to keep. "But it would be better if we had to pay fees, be part of a group or have papers to work here," says Elisangela. "Then we would have the right to demand better services. The beach is filthy. There are thieves. We need more security. I work ten hours a day without going to the bathroom. Other cities have public bathrooms, but not Recife."

José echoes his wife's complaints, adding, "This is nothing for us. We work hard and get tourists to spend money but the City pays no attention. Here is a great beach. Look at our natural [coral reef] pools for children. Everyone comes here, but the city does nothing to help those that work everyday."

José estimates that he and Elisangela pull in 100 *reais* on a good Sunday, and guesses they make about 8,000 *reais* per year. He places their lifestyle on the lowest rung

of the middle class more because they are self-employed than due to their actual income level. While his father-in-law wants to finish his working life on the beach, José and Elisângela are saving to open a new business, maybe a restaurant or snack bar somewhere in the area. I am impressed that they're able to save money. But when I ask Elisângela about this she smiles thinly and looks a little tired. "It would be nice to do something else. But that is in the future. Far away."

* * *

Perhaps the City of Recife has not installed public bathrooms along the oceanfront because it's still grappling with basic sanitation throughout the city. The problem rears its fetid head on hot, busy beach days and after heavy rainstorms flood the city's gutters. Sadly, after a long, hot day on the beach, the evening breeze can be counted on to carry the pungent perfume of hot urine and feces through the air. The city is riddled with caved-in pipes and fetid, open sinkholes obstructing sidewalks, or streets buckling suddenly under the weight of a car. Frequently, sewage drains directly to the ocean. A sociologist friend of ours estimates that only 30 percent of the city receives dependable, basic sewage disposal and trash collection. It's a believable number given that over 40 percent of the population live in *favelas*. So if Boa Viagem is supposed to be an established enclave of middle class, tourism and business, and it suffers from sewage dumped directly into the ocean, choking open canals or even pooling in the streets, imagine the less well-tended areas of town.

* * *

By two p.m., most of the beach has been cast into the shadows of the towering apartment buildings along the main avenue. Much like other urban beach cities, bungalows and single-family residences have given way to high-rise, high-density buildings allowing for more families to buy a little piece of the beachfront. Never mind that half of the buildings have windows overlooking only the apartments in front of them!

Tyrone and I live in one of the oldest high-rises in the area, having been constructed in 1964. Today our building of nine floors is a withered shrub in a forest of 20-story cement sequoias. Most of the day passes in shadow. We have no view of the ocean, but there is a positive side to living in a cement city: at night the sound of waves crashing into the erosion barriers echoes off the rigid walls of neighboring buildings and ricochets to our windows. We fall asleep soothed by the rhythm of the ocean.

My usual preference for exercise is to join the hundreds of walkers and joggers each morning on the boardwalk. One particular day the offshore winds were so

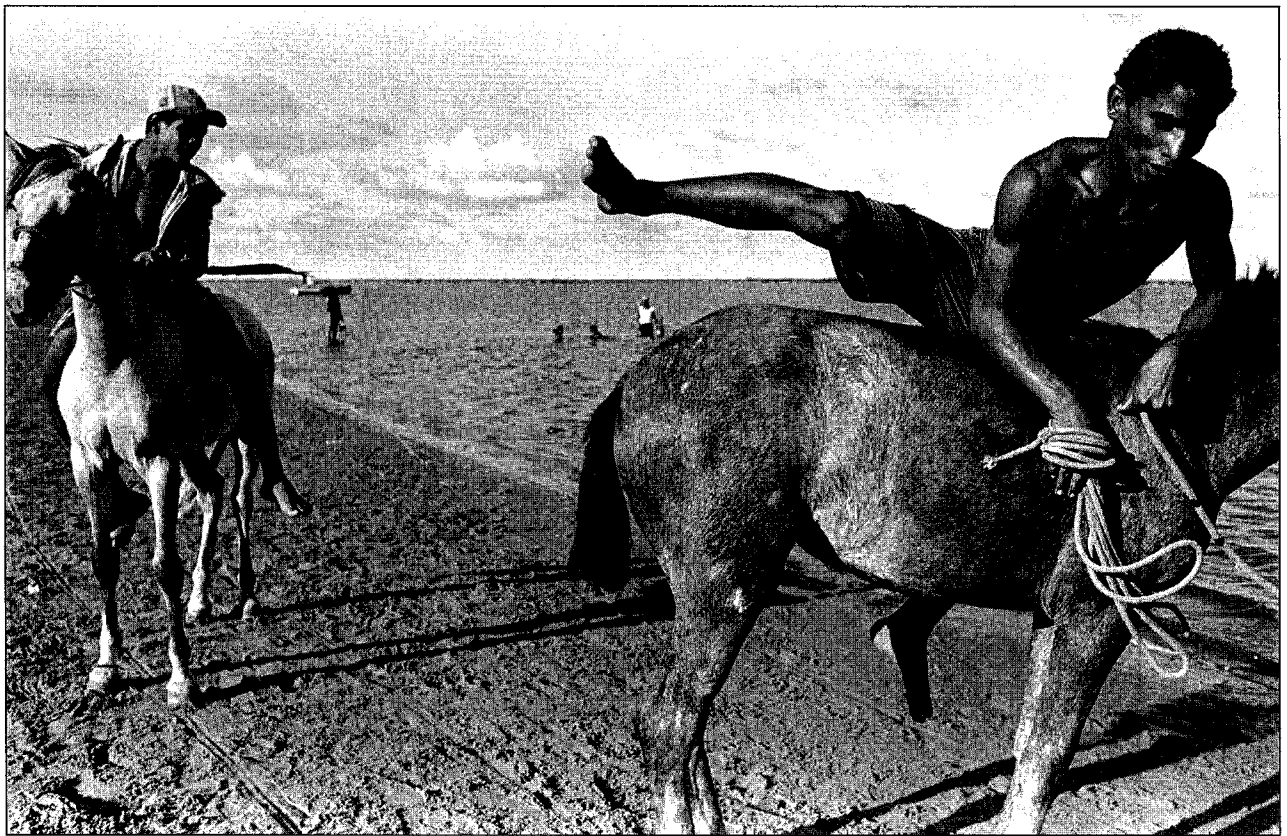
strong I decided to forego the ocean view and walk through the neighborhood south of ours. As I walked I counted eight 20-plus-story buildings under construction in a five-block area. Six months after the Brazilian currency was cut loose on the world market and allowed to seek its "fair market value" — which turned out to be about 45 percent less than it was — it seems there's a building boom. Initially, this didn't square with the rumblings of inflation and recession to come — not to mention the rampant speculation that tinged the evening news and morning papers. But in fact the next day one of the local dailies, the *Diário de Pernambuco*, had a brief article in the business section stating that real estate sales in Recife had jumped by 32.16 percent from February to March.²

I thought back to my friends Dirceau and Erica in Caçapava, São Paulo. When we were introduced, they had been married only a short time and were expecting their first baby. One Saturday in January Dirceau asked if we'd like to help in his "roof party." About a dozen buddies from work gathered on the lot where he and Erica were building their first home. We mixed cement and passed it up to a crew stationed on the crossbeams of the first floor. As they poured the ceiling I talked with Dirceau and filled buckets. With the recent devaluation of the *real*, wasn't it a crazy time to be building a house, given the sudden instability of the markets, and the fact that the cereal factory for which he worked was cutting production? (I was thinking in terms of loan payments.) Or, on the flip side, why not leave money in the bank and take advantage of rising interest rates?

Dirceau's answers were simple and logical. He paused, standing barefoot in muddy cement (so as not to ruin a pair of shoes) and shrugged. From his point of view, only the rich had enough money for interest rates to matter. What he saw as his priority was to pull his money out of the bank and sink it into something tangible before the value of the *real* plunged further; before accounts were frozen; before building costs soared in response to panic-driven inflation. He would build the house in stages as he found the money. No mortgage payments. Two weeks later the administration of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, president of Brazil, cut the national currency free from the dollar.

Most condominium-apartment towers are not built on spec in Recife. Only the most established and well-known contractors can afford to build without pre-construction sales. Usually, when a building is to be erected the lot is cleared and a very pleasant, air-conditioned office housing a scale model of the planned project is set up. It is the sales office. Construction doesn't begin until 50 to 80 percent of the residences are sold — thereby generating the capital needed. That could mean most of the construction boom I'm witnessing was paid for with money spent last year or even before. But I popped into

² "Vendas de imóveis aumentam 32,16%," *Diário de Pernambuco*, B3 4 April 1999. Recife, Brazil.



Teens who work hauling garbage in pony carts ready to leave the beach in Olinda after giving their tired animals a quick salt-water bath

a few of the air-conditioned cocoons and learned that while many buildings were begun last winter, and a few had delays in building connected to the crisis, the majority of new construction has been funded in the last year. According to one agent, Osvaldo, the market was slow last year and worsened last Spring. But in the last six months buyers have lost the upper hand and it is once again a seller's market.

The market is definitely alive. I say this given the recent deluge of Sunday-morning newspaper pullouts and prime-time commercials hawking the extra features and super luxurious condos at "super-special" prices. The ads are slick and designed to appeal to both the vanities and fears of home buyers; offering 24-hour security, exercise rooms, barbecue areas, party rooms, etc. And there are buildings for everyone, with total prices for two- to three-bedroom condos ranging from 24,000 to 90,000 *reais* (U.S.\$12,630 - \$47,400). A recent conversation with an economist friend, Leonard Sampaio, confirms Osvaldo's read of the real-estate market to some extent. But he cautions that it depends on the neighborhood, size and price. The middle-class to luxury end of the spectrum is indeed selling well as Brazilians pump their money into real estate. And because Brazil is now an affordable place to build, foreign firms, principally French and Spanish, are investing in Pernambuco, particularly in coastal cities such as Recife. But he cautions that the

lower end of the real-estate economy is growing slowly.

Perhaps the lower middle class and working class aren't investing in new homes, but there seems to be more movement in poorer sections of town. I've noticed recently a small surge in new construction in some of the *favelas* in which I have worked. Just across the pathway from the home of my friend Neta da Silva in Olinda, Senhor Luiz is building a one-bedroom house for his mother. Senhor Luiz earns his money playing the accordion on weekends and running his own neighborhood bar on weeknights. For him to have the money to buy the cement, sand and bricks to build a second house means his bar is doing well and music joints are pulling in enough money to cover entertainment costs. The patrons of these bars are the everyday workers who live in modest or poor neighborhoods and splurge on nights out when they've got the money — which they have only when they have work. (A more cynical side of me speculates that many bar patrons spend whatever meager earnings they have on drink before they take the money home for food.) Throughout the city, public projects and new construction is underway. Some businesses have closed their doors and boarded up windows — but for temporary expansion and renovations.

Back in May the minimum salary was increased from 120 *reais* per month to 136 *reais* per month (U.S.\$63. - \$72.),



Seu Jorge, 60, begins the hour-long process of hauling in a fishing net fed into the water by his sons. At the other end of the net one of his sons jumps into the water and swims the line to shore creating the shape of a horseshoe and trapping fish, crabs and even small sharks. Some days they pull in just seaweed and a few small fish.

a 13 percent raise. The minimum salary is similar to the minimum wage but is based on monthly earning versus hourly. An individual may earn several minimum salaries in a month depending on the job. This wage hike seemed a wonderful thing until ten days later when the cost of bus fare, at least in Recife, went up by 17 percent, thus passing the increase in imported fuel costs to the consumer. The squeeze has been subtle, but pervasive.

Prices for food have also crept up since last January. For example, bread has jumped 10 percent; soy oil, 17 percent; butter, 12.19 percent; beef, 11.57 percent; sugar, 9.3 percent; milk, 8.68 percent; coffee, 4.57 percent; and rice 2.68 percent. Some prices have jumped because of increased transportation costs. Others because it is more lucrative for producers to earn U.S. dollars by exporting their products (creating a false shortage within Brazil). As consumers try to cut corners by avoiding commodities tied to the import-export market the demand for even the cheapest of foods has increased and driven up costs. For example the cost of manioc flour, used widely in Northeastern cooking, has jumped 5.1 percent.

The overall *cesta basica* (basic basket), a term used to refer to the minimum food needed to sustain the average family, is out of the reach of many. I checked out typical

cestas, assembled, shrink-wrapped and displayed at my neighborhood grocery store. Included in the kit were the following: two kilos each of beans, manioc flour, sugar, and white rice; two packages of spaghetti and two of corn couscous; one liter of soy oil, one package of coffee, 200 grams of dried milk, a box of cream crackers, a jar of tomato paste, a package of *goiaba* paste (a sweet), a tin of sardines, a box of butter cookies, one box of corn starch and a bag of salt. All this for \$9.50. Of course not too many of the people who would base their diet on the *cesta basica* ever have enough money to buy it all at once. The cost of these items jumps to about \$12.00 when purchased individually. And this is the stripped-down version, omitting the fresh foods recommended in the official *cesta basica*, which includes meats, fruits and vegetables.

The *Departamento Intersindical de Estudos e Estatísticas Socio-economicas* (*Dieese* — The Interunion Department of Socio-economic Studies and Statistics) estimates that for a month, a family of two adults and two children needs to spend \$133 on food to be healthy and well nourished. The same Recife household will spend a total of \$472 to cover housing, food, education, transportation and hygiene each month — nearly seven minimum salaries! According to *Dieese* economist Teresa Cristina Vanderley de Araújo, a family of four that can not afford

to feed and house itself at this standard is below the poverty line. Putting this into perspective, another organization, *Centro Interuniversitario de Estudos da America Latina, Africa and Asia* (CIELA- Interuniversity Center for Studies of Latin America, Africa and Asia) estimates that 45 percent of Recife's households earn less than two minimum salaries per month, or \$143 (roughly \$1,716 annually).³

When I ask friends and acquaintances what they think of the economy, most are cautiously cynical — an almost practiced tone that masks both true pessimism and optimism. There's a feeling of waiting for the other shoe to drop. And there's also the feeling that if "the other shoe" does drop, everyone will survive. With the devaluation of the *real* came a little initial belt-tightening and lifestyle-crimping. Those that had car loans pegged to the U.S. dollar saw their monthly payments jump overnight. For friends living closer to the edge the effects were more obvious. The food on the table changed: less meat and fish was served up with the daily rice and beans. Milk was watered down. Medications were skipped; outings eliminated. As for those beyond the edge, living in miserable, precarious conditions, nothing changed.

* * *

In January the government of President Ferdinand Henrique Cardoso (FHC) decided to free the *real* from a fixed exchange rate and let it seek its market value. The goal was to stop pumping Brazilian federal reserves into buying *reais* as a means of propping up the value as equal to the U.S. dollar. In the long run, this was to stimulate

the economy and spur growth by making investment cheap — both to foreigners and Brazilians.

In reality things were overpriced, especially given the lower costs of labor here. A sandwich, for example, cost \$7.50 — before the devaluation. Pretty steep. Now, the same meal costs me less than five bucks. A modest two-bedroom apartment ran \$1,200. Now it's about \$750. For me Brazil has gotten more reasonable (though five bucks is still expensive for a sandwich). Overvalued items are closer to their worth. But for the Brazilians, it's still a \$5 sandwich — one fourteenth of a minimum salary. (This is just an example; there are, of course many less expensive delicious options for lunch — but they're still pricey for someone working a six-day week for 20 bucks!)

Initially there was more fear of panic spiking inflation than actual panic or actual inflation. That fear-of-the-fear folded in on itself and created genuine panic. Brazilians remember the last time they lived through outrageous inflation. This time around no one wanted to be on the losing side. Everyone took on the attitude that they were going to get screwed. Merchants began raising prices of goods in the name of increased costs to come.

To calm the waters the government launched an advertising campaign designed to tap into Brazilian patience, urging everyone to calm down and pull together to suffer through what it deemed temporary and necessary growing pains for a great country. And Brazilians hold little as dear as the idea of being a great country. One of the more successful and pervasive *mottoes* became: "*Com crise, se cresce; se cresce, com crisis*" — roughly trans-



Waldeson, 10, helps his father pull in a 50-meter net on the beach in Boa Viagem, Recife. Waldeson dreams of being a strong fisherman like his father, uncles and grandfather. He prefers his days in the water to studying and often skips school to bring in the fish, saying he doesn't learn anything in class and likes helping with the family income. After the fish are picked from the net Waldeson and his grandfather, Seu Jorge, put on clean shirts and carry the fresh catch from building, to building selling to longstanding clients.

³ A table published in the August 25, 1999 edition of *Veja* magazine listed the Brazilian national average per capita income at \$4,807 U.S. dollars. No source was cited for the figures.

lated it says "With crisis is growth; there is growth with crisis."

Ask if Brazil should follow IMF austerity measures to strengthen its economy, and the adamant response is, "No, only Brazil should control the destiny of Brazil." Ask what they think of the privatization of state industries like natural gas, water, petroleum, electricity and telephones, and the reply is indignation. The government is seen as a greedy band of profiteers out to sell Brazil's incredible assets to the highest-bidding foreign company (never mind that many government-owned enterprises have been poorly run with high rates of waste, corruption and poor service). In one breath Brazilians simultaneously rail against their leaders and embrace them as theirs alone for the criticizing.

President Cardoso's approval ratings fell below 35 percent in September, making him the most unpopular civilian Brazilian president this century (and prompting the Brazilian press to compare him to former U.S. president Jimmy Carter). In July and August, the President took a bath on the privatization of the national phone system. As the system was switched over, São Paulo, Rio and other major urban areas were tossed into a communications morass. The process snarled calls and dragged on for days.

Angry rumblings began immediately and patience was short. All too present in public's memory was last year's nearly disastrous privatization of Rio de Janeiro's electricity company. The new company, Light, inherited an outdated, under-capacity infrastructure that had seen little investment in the last 30 years. When a high-demand, El Nino-toasted summer rolled around, the city was plunged into electricity chaos. Protests became riots and Brazilians felt betrayed.

Anti-Cardoso politicians raised a hue and cry and called for the impeachment of the President, saying he lacked the ability to pull together effective leadership and move the country forward. Fresh "*Basta FHC!*" (Enough FHC!) graffiti appeared scrawled on walls and pasted onto the bumpers of cars. The President proposed an ambitious public works program, "*Avança Brasil*" (Advance Brazil) to Congress in an effort to turn the tide of negative approval ratings. Fellow party members such as Jarbas Vasconcelos, governor of Pernambuco, likewise launched high visibility state projects to boost the government's image.

But then the political drama was brought before the peoples' court of justice: the soccer field. In an August match between Botafogo de Ribeiro Preto and Flamengo, adored star Romário scored a goal for the latter and celebrated by lifting his soccer jersey to display a T-shirt on which was emblazoned: "*FHC, eu e muitos estamos com você.*" ("FHC, I and many others are with you.") Poof! The acrid commercials disappeared. Political commen-

tators switched from talking about FHC's head on a platter to brushing aside the idea of impeachment as absurd and groundless. The sails were empty. The squall had passed. While FHC's approval rating continued to drop, the buzz about his job security subsided. But the seas are still rough. FHC is viewed as an intellectual out of touch with the reality of his country; an improviser, unable to get a cabinet to work together.

The emotional perspective of the privatization process was not really clear to me until late last week when Tyrone and I visited an abandoned social security building that had been invaded by a group of urban homeless organized by the group *Movimento Urbano Sem Tetos* (*MUST* -Urban roofless movement). Since we have been following the landless movement in the area, the *sem terras*, a nationally organized network of landless who invade unused lands as a means of forcing redistribution of property, we thought it would be interesting to get to know their counterparts in the city.

We arrived to find a group of exhausted "occupants" tossing rotting government papers and debris onto the sidewalk. At the doorway stood a youngish man in jeans and a clerical collar. Reverend Marcos, of the Anglican Church, deftly juggled cell-phone calls while politely explaining to a reporter from the daily *Folha do Pernambuco* that neither she nor any of her newsroom colleagues would be permitted into the building because the daily's owners were large landowners who used the publication to perpetuate elite interests. He then turned and led us up two flights of soggy stairs to the main room being cleared of 15 years of grime and trash.

While being prepped for a live TV spot, Reverend Marcos talked about his group and their goal to convert the building into apartments for 200 families and then invade another 22 public buildings, "The government said this building is useless. It is going to be auctioned, but this building belongs to the Brazilian people. Their taxes, blood and sweat built it. [All in the name of] privatization! This government just wants to sell our resources to big multi-nationals — then they will charge more and we will not be able to say anything. We will lose our voice. Privatization will send us back decades."

Reverend Marcos' words startled me. I had not expected to hear privatization linked to the political issues of housing shortages in Brazil. (It is estimated that 1.3 million homes would have to be built each year for the next ten years to solve the housing shortage.) On another level, I was also surprised to hear the passion in his words — it gave me insight into conversations from the past year. Whether the whipping boy of the moment or not, "privatization" is a volatile topic and has come to represent the betrayal of the Brazilian working class. As the Reverend said, they see it as a selling of the pounds of flesh that were exacted to build lofty public works. Now their flesh and suf-

fering is being sold off — and at cheap prices, as the government hurries to build the private sector economy.

These emotions stem from what I am just coming to understand as the complex Brazilian identity. This is a culture in which paternalism shares the stage with fierce ideas about individual freedoms. But it is more complicated than that. There is a sense that the government has a real obligation to the country, to each citizen. This notion extends beyond the notions of equality and justice and to the idea that the government should care for all — should ride in on a white horse and fix problems — homelessness, drought, hunger, unemployment. So many individuals I've met have spoken about feeling forgotten by the government or neglected — as if it is a personal relationship. The language used is similar to that used when talking about religion — God, the father, will provide; Brazil, the father-like, will provide. It is not a casual obligation. As in parenthood, the parent must provide and nurture and care for the offspring. There is a certain sense of receiving your just dues when the government, churches and social organizations are discussed. The expectation is that of the open hand of a child extended to a parent. How can it be refused?

If the Brazilian population is the child of the government, then I would venture to say that it is somewhere in early adolescence — demanding to be treated as equal and independent, while still demanding to be cared for and still a little fearful of authority. I've noticed a paradox. While many recognize the failings of public services, the corruption of politicians, the waste inherent in convoluted bureaucracy and the injustice of prejudicial practices (I am not condemning Brazil — only listing sources of dissatisfaction I've heard) they are slow to challenge the system. If I had a dollar for every time I've heard complaints and diatribes against a Brazilian entity end with, "Ah, but Brazil is only 500 years old. We are still a young country. We are still learning," I wouldn't need a fellowship.

Perhaps because the country has recently achieved democratic rule after decades of dictatorship, there is a pervasive and collective patience. Brazilians have learned to wait through crazy times of repression and wade through nearly comical bureaucratic labyrinths without losing optimism. The combination of patience and hope is a powerful one that lends sustenance and fortitude to both people facing the small obstacles of daily life and to reform movements — such as the *sem terra* and *sem teto* movements. At the same time, it also undermines the notion of individual responsibility and action. "X" will provide, be it God, the Church, the President, the local mayor, the doctor. Someone will step in and carry us along to the future. It's a very biblical attitude; it is a survivalist approach and gives Brazilians freedom to live for the day with a confidence that everything will improve tomorrow. One acquaintance of mine, John Burns, a former priest and current director of alcohol-addiction

recovery clinics, sees it as a form of messianism: the awaiting a figure or leader to show them the way.

Additionally, while many seem to realize they have a "right" to something, there is not a very developed idea of the individual having the right to challenge authority — be it in public services or as consumers. The result is a lot of venting, but little individual action. The exceptions are in social-action groups that have gathered momentum. But time after time, the leaders and directors of social programs I've met list among their toughest challenges the development of a sense of empowerment through *conscientização* (building awareness and active citizenship) and the improvement of self-esteem.

Brazil is the country of the future. It's motto — coined last century and emblazoned on its national flag is "Order and Progress," suggesting that the greatness will come in the process. A former professor of mine, Marshall Eakin of Vanderbilt University, has recently published a book on Brazil that offers clear insights into its complicated history and culture. One of the most telling is the book title itself, *Brazil the Once and Future Country*. This is a nugget of understanding the pride Brazilians feel in their multi-ethnic origins, their dogged survival through many trials, and the vision and desire to be ranked among the great countries of the world.

Last January and February, when the economic crisis was playing out at its very worst, I heard in conversations a mixture of dismay and pride — dismay because Brazilians did not want their country to be plunged into another crippling recession. The prospect recalled all-too-recent memories of staggering inflation and shortages. Lingering in the minds of some was the fear that maybe democracy would buckle under such pressures. But there was also a giddy pride beneath the worry: all eyes were on Brazil. Would Brazil's economy collapse in the wake of the Asian and Russian crises — plunging the world into deeper economic woe? Or would Brazil rally and hold together the Latin American economy and lend stability to world markets? Either way, Brazil was a player, and Brazilians liked it.

* * *

Back in Boa Viagem, if you ignore the poor and underemployed working in the streets, begging at stop lights and the walking shoeless, it's hard to tell there's an immediate "crisis" at hand. This may sound impossible to do, but I meet people everyday who are used to the conditions of the poor, or who manage to live their lives in such a routine that they no longer see the debilitating chronic hunger, underdevelopment, poor health care, unemployment and weak education system. The pervasive poverty can be almost numbing. Everything seems to blend together and become the norm: the way life is, and will be.

About seven blocks from the beach is Shopping Rec-

ife. It looks a lot like the multi-level mega-malls in the United States; the kind that have several store fronts of the same companies so that shoppers do not have to walk the entire area of the mall. Tyrone and I first ventured in last April to buy a printer for our computer. It was an exasperating experience as we walked loops through the mall in order to compare prices only to find they were increasing by the minute. We finally stopped, bought the most reasonably priced printer in front of us at that very minute and stepped off the merry-go-round.

Prices have calmed since then because the *real* has stabilized against the dollar. However, throughout the last six months I've made a point of watching the crowds at the malls (whenever computer needs took us there) and have seen only growing business and consumption. Shopping Recife (one of five malls in the area) has become a social and commercial hub for those with disposable income. Its vast corridors are stuffed with cell phone-toting shoppers. And they're not just there to look. Bags overflow from baby carriages and weigh down shoppers. The mall has been upgrading the selection of stores. Recent arrivals include Guess?, Armani, and high-end Brazilian names. By night live music fills the main plaza area. It's become the safe, air-conditioned, hip place to be — a café culture in a bubble.

My favorite thing about Shopping Recife is the moat. It's not a real moat, but close. The complex sits in the middle of an asphalt island surrounded by first a ring of ten-foot high fencing, then a ring of sewage canals (on three sides) separating it from *favelas*, some "formalized" and bustling with business, others in crumbling poverty. Guards pace the perimeter to deter unwanted elements from disturbing the shopping peace. Driving or walking out of the fence is an immediate reality check as open hands and pleading faces approach. Kids in rags walk up to the windows of cars and press their foreheads against the glass hoping the window will roll down and someone inside will share a little change or hand out some leftovers.

Some barriers are not so visible. In our own building I experienced a few lessons that underscored just how complex class relations are. Our building is maintained by a group of four men. Three work during the day doing general repairs, cleaning and opening and closing the door to the parking area. They're all nice guys, affable and competent. A few months ago I needed help hooking up a butane tank to the stove and called Ricardo, one of the building caretakers, to see if he could help me. He sent up his wife.

Carla appeared, hooked up the gas and showed me how to test it. All the while she talked one long stream of talk. In less than five minutes I learned that she and Ricardo had four children and were expecting a fifth in December; had just lost half of their house to fire; and had to care for her aged, sickly parents. Carla had lost

her \$10.50/week job cleaning an apartment in the building and a month before Ricardo's salary was halved due to the "crisis".

It realized I was getting the heavy pitch. While I had no intention of hiring a maid, I buckled under her insistence and agreed to hire her for a one-time, thorough cleaning of the apartment for \$20.00. I offered a generous fee because I figured she needed the money. She arrived the following Thursday as agreed and whipped the apartment into shape in no time. I thanked her, paid her and off she went.

A few days later, very early, the doorbell rang. I opened it to find Carla just wondering if I needed help. I replied gently that I did not and said goodbye. The same scenario played out each morning for the next several days. Eventually, after hearing more details of her and Carlos' home life I again agreed to hire her for the day. This time when she arrived she hopped around nervously until she worked up the nerve to ask me to sit down. We sat at the table and she explained that her house was in shambles after the fire and asked that I lend her the \$75.00 she needed to pay for materials to rebuild the walls. She suggested that she could clean for me once a week, earning only half her salary, until it was paid off. She also announced that she had quit her other part-time job so she would be available for me. I was cornered. And so we got a cleaning lady.

One Thursday Tyrone and I had to visit a friend in the neighboring city. I asked Carla to pull the door closed behind her when she had finished. It would lock automatically. We returned after dinner that evening to find Carla sitting on the chair, eating papaya and watching TV. It was after 7 p.m. Normally Carla is gone by 1 p.m. I was horrified that she was still there because I knew that meant her crippled mother was tending the four children at home. Carla had misunderstood me and thought she needed to stay until we returned. I apologized over and over again.

Later that night, still feeling guilty I recounted the incident to Neide, our neighbor. Neide and her husband, Mizon, are young doctors. She is a pediatrician in a state hospital and Mizon is in the slow process of building his own clinic practice. They have two small children, Felipe, 4, and Camila, 2, and have gone through no less than eight live-in babysitter-cook-maids in the nine months we've known the family. I told Neide how awful I felt that Carla had stayed late. She stared at me blankly. I elaborated that it was bad of me to have wasted Carla's time. No reaction. I sensed a big gulf between us. Then Neide said, "What else does she have to do?"

The lesson was that a poorer woman's time was less valuable and her family less important than her employer's. I worked the conversation around to pay. Just how much does it cost Neide to have a six-day-a-week

live-in maid, cook and babysitter? \$53 a month- less than one minimum salary. And, Neide added, "I prefer to hire girls from the interior. They're quieter and don't want to go home as often because the bus is expensive and the trips are long."

* * *

There is poetry to be seen in these situations. The same women exploited in households are treasured for their ability to cook traditional foods and teach folk songs and old stories to children. Children are doted over and it is appreciated. Through the kitchens, gardens and doorways of many middle- and upper-class homes the links between economic levels are nurtured. As time passes and they get to know each other's families and histories, the connections and sense of responsibility to one another develop and create an informal aid network. The families often become entwined. In dire times it is to the employer that a maid or babysitter turns for a little extra

help. Or they toss out the name of a sibling or cousin looking for work so that if the "*dona de casa*" hears of anyone needing help... The flow is two-way.

And on the street, worlds away from Shopping Recife, local bars and *botecos* are vibrant with musicians singing bittersweet laments of life, slapping down fast games of dominos and telling fish stories. Businessmen, students and kissy couples sidle up to the same bars for evening snacks and quick beers winding up their day. Everyone dances to the same music. And in the latest hours of night, just before dawn, comes the "clippity, clop, clop," of bony, undernourished horses pulling carts driven by bony, undernourished men as they begin again the daily routines that link the haves to the have-nots.

Until next time,

Susan

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