

# FISH ON FRIDAYS—A PORTRAIT OF MOZAMBIQUE

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THE winds of rising literacy in Africa and Asia have made a certain amount of tact obligatory, almost everywhere except in South Africa. Good, old-fashioned oppression, Kiplingesque "lesser-breeds-without-the-law" practice, must now be called something else.

A spade is no longer a spade in colonial parlance. It is something like: An instrument designed through proper manual labour gradually to raise the level of subsistence and civilization of the primitive indigenous people, until in the foreseeable future a level warranting the use of propulsion mechanisms is attained.

So, in Portuguese territories, probably the briskest and most efficient pattern of oppression anywhere in Africa is known as "the concept of identity".

This concept is based on two premises—both fallacious, but both having a singular power to hoodwink the many people horrified by the excesses in South Africa and British-dominated territories into thinking there is something somehow rather different, rather more benign and civilized, in the administrations of Portugal, France and Belgium.

"Identity" postulates that Mozambique and Angola are not colonies but integral parts of metropolitan Portugal; and that the indigenous peoples are merely at a low level of civilization because they have not developed far enough, though full status and citizenship are, of course, open to all.

Both these postulates are so palpably false that were it not for the idyllic picture so efficiently spread abroad by the Salazar regime they would hardly be worthy of notice.

Mozambique and Angola are only technically parts of Portugal. The actual form of government in Mozambique, for example, works like this—

An Act of 1951 has designated Mozambique an "overseas province", which gives a limited number of people the titular status of Portuguese citizens and the right—theoretically—to take part in the election of the President of the Republic.

The legislative body is the National Assembly in Portugal,

which has 120 Deputies. To this body Mozambique has the right to "elect" three, and this out of a total population of nearly 6,000,000. These Deputies need not, and, in fact, frequently do not, have any connection with Africa.

In practice, too, a qualification for election means active support of the fascist Salazar regime, for the opposition is small and subject to constant harassments by the secret police.

Local government is almost entirely of an administrative nature. At the base of the structure there are a few African village headmen, appointed for "reliability". These headmen, known as *regulos*, get about £4 a month. Below the *regulo* there are a few minor village heads, who get no pay, but an annual gratuity based on the collection of taxes in their areas.

This whole system is subject to tremendous abuse, usually connected with bribery.

One of the functions of the white *Chefo do Posto* is the impressment of African forced labour. The money which flows into the officials' own pockets as a result of this unsavoury occupation is openly admitted in Mozambique. Similarly, the collection of taxes is known to be rotten with large scale dishonesty.

The theoretical identity of the African with the Portuguese colonist is based upon the remote possibility of the African's becoming an *assimilado*.

The theory is that the Portuguese are in Africa on a divine, civilizing mission. The Africans are not yet fit for citizenship, but as soon as any individual rises to a high enough level he is qualified for the rights, duties and privileges of the white man who enjoys the benevolent patronage of Dr. Salazar.

Practice, of course, is different, and it is illuminating to analyse the complete hollowness of this pretty theory.

Taking as a basis the 1950 census—apparently erring on the side of understatement of total population, as it was based on tax receipts—there were in Mozambique 4,353 assimilated Africans, out of a total African population of about 5,600,000. In Angola the number was higher—30,039.

When one considers the qualifications necessary for admission to the status of 'assimilated one', the only surprising thing is that these figures are so high.

The *assimilado* must: have definitely adopted a "European manner of life" and abandoned certain native customs such as polygamy; he must speak fluently and write Portuguese; he

must possess some trade, profession or calling giving a recognized financial status; and he must have completed his military service.

His fitness for citizenship is judged by a tribunal, which is not famous for lack of political bias and hostility to the Salazar concepts of government.

The emphasis on the first of these qualifications makes it quite impossible for any African who is not a practising Roman Catholic to gain admission to these select ranks.

The almost complete lack of educational facilities, the grinding poverty imposed by the economic colour bar, the system of forced labour at ridiculous wages, and the virtual impossibility of any African learning a profession or acquiring a lucrative trade put up almost as effective an apartheid system as any dreamt up by Dr. Verwoerd.

Another difficulty is that many Africans equipped for *assimilado* status are prevented from acquiring it by the fear that it will mean losing their jobs.

Then, according to Lord Hailey ('An African Survey Revised,' 1956), the Decree of 1954 which restated the qualifications for admission to the degree of *assimilado* appears to have been intended to narrow rather than to enlarge the avenue of approach to this status.

It is also apparently—and significantly—linked with a drive to increase the number of Portuguese inhabitants of African territories.

These facts, however, are part of a broader pattern of repressive government, part of the ruthless Salazar dictatorship which seems to have gone unnoticed by the outside world, and to have escaped the obloquy gained, for example, by Franco, and our own trinity, Malan, Strijdom and Verwoerd.

On a recent visit to Mozambique I found the greatest difficulty in tracing anyone who was willing to say anything against the regime at all. When I did, through an elaborate pyramid of introductions and cross-introductions, find a small, white opposition group—I could find no evidence of organized African opposition whatever—I was surprised at their bitterness and vehemence.

It was said the only possibility of change was through a *coup d'état*, although any organization towards that end was denied, and the people to whom I spoke strongly blamed the N.A.T.O. alliance for bolstering up the corrupt central government. Were it not for active American support and encouragement, the

Salazar regime would have been rotted by its own corruption, probably soon after World War II.

There was no sign of Communist organization, although there is, as usual, much talk in state circles of left-wing activity.

"To be a Communist here", one member of the small Portuguese opposition told me, "all you have to do is eat meat on Fridays".

"If there were no Communist Party", another said, "the Portuguese oligarchy would have had to invent one to excuse the trampling down and persecution of any opposition".

Among the complex of factors which prevent the formation of any African liberatory movements is the rigorous and efficient censorship of the Press.

This has, of course, the almost equally important function of stemming any tide of emancipatory ideas among the whites, for in struggles for freedom white and black show a tendency to merge, as any African government is aware.

I spent some time in a newspaper office in Lourenço Marques, and watched proofs being sent over to the adjacent censor's office. Publication is not permitted until they are returned officially stamped, and such is the efficient conditioning of the newspaper staffs that I saw none that needed alteration.

The same censorship, of course, applies to books and newspapers that come from the world beyond, and by the time the mill has ground, only the most innocuous of facts and theories are permitted to the small literate population of Mozambique.

While I was there, for example, a group of elderly men were arrested in Portugal on vague charges connected with the invitation of Aneurin Bevan to Portugal. This was widely known—but only as it had been broadcast from Brazzaville.

Apart from the sheer difficulty of obtaining facts and ideas, however, there is the fear of the efficient and ever-vigilant secret police.

In the pleasant sidewalk cafés, I was assured, there were always stationed one or two members of the police whose only duties were to watch and to observe. Several of these alleged policemen were pointed out to me, and they did, in fact, seem to have a familiar look of lowering watchfulness.

Stories of sudden and unexplained disappearances are commonplace, particularly among Africans who for one reason or another get a bit uppity, but the white population is said to be far from immune.

It is said that the probability of disappearance is in direct ratio with prominence in social, personal and international life—which is another law well understood by this type of government.

I heard a possibly apocryphal story of an undertaker in Portugal who eventually objected to the number of mutilated corpses—normally, apparently, they had finger nails missing—delivered to his chambers by the police. The undertaker, so I was told, had his reward. He disappeared too.

There are stories—which I was unable to establish—of a remote and fever-ridden Devil's Island somewhere in the north, near Beira, largely for political prisoners.

There is also, though, the undoubted fact that many thousands of Africans have been impressed and sent to the islands of Sao Thome and Príncipe in the Gulf of Guinea on the West Coast, from which it is said, no one returns. They go as forced labour, and not specifically for punitive reasons, but the presence of the islands acts as a firm deterrent.

One of the least pleasant aspects of the "policy of identity" is the system of forced labour on which the whole under-industrialized economy of Mozambique and Angola seems to rest. (This lack of industrialization, incidentally, is another main factor in preventing any emergent African nationalistic feeling. There is no factory-bred, aware working-class).

Forced labour falls into two categories. There is direct compulsion, which is tantamount to slavery, and there is the export of labour, which is probably the main industry of Mozambique and Angola.

Forced labour is founded on the pleasant theory that every able-bodied man must do six months work.

It follows, such is the logic of exploitation, that when, for example, a farmer wants labour he applies to the *Chefo do Posto* who, with the aid of tame headmen, rounds up the required number of labourers, usually from villages near by.

These workers are known as *contradados*. If after working for six months at more than 12 hours a day he is allowed to leave his job, he will be owed about £6. Out of this, about £4 is deducted for tax. If he dies before his term of work is over, his wages are taken by the State. (These figures are on the authority of Joaquim Sequeira Vas, who worked for seven years as an administrative officer in Mozambique).

The six-month term is, however, purely nominal, and the

worker is often kept in these slave-like conditions for years.

These labour conscripts are also often used by local administrative officers to build roads in their territories, at similar wages, to improve the officers' standing with the central government.

The bribery encouraged by these transactions is a by-word.

There is a similar impressment of domestic servants, to do what is called, with fine irony, *trabalho voluntario*—(voluntary work). The employer deposits the necessary money with the administrator, and the worker, at most, is said to get an occasional 5s. flung at him.

The export of labour is more highly-developed and more profitable. This trade is a function of the State, but for every African recruited the agent receives a commission.

In 1928 an agreement was made between Mozambique and South Africa for the recruitment of 100,000 workers a year for work in the gold and coal mines of South Africa. A fee of 35s. is levied for every worker recruited.

The workers are recruited for the islands of Sao Thome and Principé on a four-year basis. This is the type of export most dreaded by the impressed African.

There are two practical consequences of this trade which are disliked by the Portuguese administrator.

The first is that Portuguese territories—and, in particular, Mozambique—are being denuded of a very valuable commodity, labour. Apart from the actual export, many Africans flee the territory to South Africa, where, and Mr. Eric Louw is quite right, the conditions are preferable.

Secondly, punitive measures are difficult, for no one wants to lock up or to disable a valuable piece of property. Corporal punishment is, therefore, applied with the greatest freedom, and without recourse to the courts.

Horse-whipping (*sova de cavalmarin*) is sometimes used, but by far the commonest instrument is a sort of bastinado, an instrument that looks like a ping-pong bat with holes which raises painful blisters but does not incapacitate the African for work. Although this is said to be illegal it is used by the police almost as a matter of course.

Within this framework the lot of the white man is physically comfortable, and he luxuriates in the high standard of living common to the pink pigmentocracy in Africa.

He has, however, very little freedom of speech, no freedom to

criticize, and if he is at all hostile to the Salazar regime he is subject to persecution by the secret police.

The gulf left by 200 years of systematic and efficient oppression by the Portuguese colonial power between him and the African is so great that there seems little chance of bridging this gap and making any form of common democratic cause.

In any case, there seem to be very few indeed among the 48,813 whites in Mozambique or the 78,826 in Angola who want to. Life generally is pleasant and easy, there is practically no cultural or intellectual activity, and the relaxed sidewalk cafés, hot climate and amiable social life are quite enough to sap the energies of the average *civilizada*.

The complete grip of the Roman Catholic Church on most spheres of activity, too, is not a force which actively encourages ideas of emancipation from the Salazar hierarchy. For in Portuguese territories, as in Spain, there is no question but that the Church looks after its elder children first.

There is little visible evidence of discrimination against Indians or mulattoes, but they are subject to subtle social humiliations, and do not find it as easy to ascend the economic hierarchy as do those of Portuguese stock.

There is, though, no evidence of political activity among these not-quite first-class citizens.

The outlook, then, in Portuguese Africa is bleak. Through the factors analysed, the recent Accra Conference has made little or no impression. The systematic and ruthless disregard of human values through two centuries has left a population repressed and inarticulate, and with little prospect of finding a voice.

If the whispered-of *coup d'état* forces itself into reality in the foreseeable future—which seems only a remote possibility—the benefit to the African initially would probably be only slight.

There is, undoubtedly, a subterranean struggle going on in Portugal, but many depths below those brave and articulate people there are the disregarded—the millions who live at a stratum we now rightly regard as less than human, and whose chances of achieving full humanity are less, I think, than anywhere else in Africa.