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2.6

Family Adventures: Out in the Midday Sun

The sun stood high, it was hot, and the Landrover threw up a cloud of dust. The barefooted African walking alongside the road wore a tattered greatcoat and a bowler hat. Behind him trailed four mongrel dogs that looked even more skinny than usual. 'Just wait a minute'. The Portuguese overseer braked, stopped and jumped out of the car. When I looked over my shoulder to see what was going on I saw him walking up to the African and hitting him flat-handed on his bowler hat. Red-faced he was screaming something I could not understand. The African took off his battered hat. When the overseer climbed back behind the steering wheel I asked him in my best Portuguese what had happened. 'If you want to run this place properly, these blacks have to know their place'. 'I am the overseer of this section and when he sees me he has to take off his hat'. 'He did not, so I taught him a lesson!'.

I had been in Luabo for three weeks and it had been a mixed experience. The arrival of a soil chemist had surprised the Dutch General Field Manager who had not been notified and who was due for overseas leave three days after I called on him for the first time. Since there was no soil laboratory yet, I was requested to design one and to make up my mind as to what type of equipment and chemicals were required. We would discuss the issue further on his return. When I asked him when that would be, the reply was 'in six months time'. Next I was to contact the Field Manager and the Factory Manager and request them to show me the ropes in the fields and the factory. Before being dismissed and left to my own devices, I mustered the courage to ask what type of transport I would be issued with. 'You have two legs and tomorrow you can go to the company stores and get yourself a bicycle'. 'By the way, you are employed by an English company now, so do me a kind favour and address me in English in future'. After this little sermon all I could manage before leaving the office was a smart 'yes sir'. Walking back to the guest house I envied Meta who must now be driving my Fiat 500 in Amsterdam and undoubtedly had more friendly conversations with her supervisor than I just had with my boss.

On my third day in Luabo I called on the Field Manager who told me to report to the shunting yard at five o'clock next morning. Arriving there in the customary attire - khaki shorts with a matching shirt, long socks and a pith helmet - I felt out of place and ridiculous. An old steam locomotive belched soot into the air and then slowly started pulling two open wagons towards a group of African women. I received my instructions. 'The Sena women you see over there are the weeding gang which you will have to supervise in field L 11'. 'There are 60 of them with two *capitões* who will mark the tasks'. 'When the work is done, around three o'clock, all of you will be

picked up by the train again'. While one *capitão* issued hoes and the other filled drums with drinking water I watched the women. Most of them were young, in their teens I guessed, many had babies wrapped on their backs and some were breast feeding them. There was plenty of laughter and talk and when the driver pulled the steam whistle, the water drums were loaded and everyone scrambled for the wagons.

Moving slowly over the wobbly narrow gauge tracks it took us almost half an hour to reach our destination and when the train had left again the *capitões* began marking the tasks. It was obvious that no one was in need of my supervisory talents and just when I started feeling completely superfluous the women squatted around me and began talking all at the same time. When they realised I did not understand a word of Sena one of them switched to Portuguese, but all I could grasp was that something had to be done with the babies. Finally a young girl mustered her courage. She stood up, took her baby from the sling, popped a breast from her grubby blue bra and walked towards a cluster of gum trees. It dawned on me that they wanted some women to take care of the babies in the shade and was quick to allocate this task to two of them. My first labour decision in Africa was immediately challenged when one of the *capitões* returned. 'Sir, what are those women doing over there under the trees?' When I told him he laughed. 'They are very cunning these Sena woman, sir, but there is no reason why they should not work with their babies on their back'. When I stood my ground, he shrugged and walked away. The women laughed and then started singing, one taking the lead the others falling in:

'O capitão'

'O capitão'

'O capitão'

'Mbolo yamako, capitão, ndanetta'

It was obvious that they were mocking the foreman and that the song was not free from obscenities. It was, however, only years later that I learned that '*mbolo yamako, capitão, ndanetta*' meant 'your mother's prick, foreman I am tired already!'¹ Much to the chagrin of the two foremen, the women began their song again when we returned to the shunting yard later that afternoon.

In the weeks that followed I supervised land preparation gangs, attended to the planting of sugar cane seedlings by the Anguru migrant labour and visited all the labour compounds. In view of the increasingly long distances I had to travel, I was granted permission to requisite a pumping trolley (*jigajiga*) from the railway workshop and to recruit a crew of four 'pumping boys' and a foreman. For foreman I choose a young Ngoni, Muluga Lanterna, and left it to him to find four suitable 'pumping boys'. In the morning the *jigajiga* would be waiting for me in the shunting yard and once Muluga and I had seated ourselves on the wooden front bench, the crew would push the vehicle until it had gained enough speed to work the pumping handles. Like with almost anything in Luabo there was a strict pecking order among the travellers on the one-way track. If the oncoming traffic happened to be the General Field Manager, Field Manager or Assistant Field Manager, I would yell 'give way' and my *jigajiga* would be lifted off the rails as quick as possible. If my crew identified oncoming traffic as a Portuguese overseer they would increase speed and force him to get his vehicle off the rails in a hurry, even when it was close to a switch. Only in the eyes of the locomotive drivers we were all equal and forced off the rails without mercy.

Being out in the sugar cane fields almost all day I rapidly learned to find my way around and in the evenings I had time to read up on the geomorphology of the area.

With a length of 3.500 km, a catchment area of 830.000 km² and an average discharge of 250.000 m³/sec the Zambesi belonged to the world's major river systems. Its delta area, with all the classic characteristics of a flood plain such as river channels, point bar complexes, oxbows, natural levees and basin areas, covered some 44.000 km². The Luabo plantation was situated on the north bank of the main stream of the Zambesi, some 70 km from where the river entered the Indian Ocean at Chinde. Along the river bank it extended for 25 km in the form of a wedge-shaped compact block of land, 12 km wide at the far eastern end and then gradually narrowing to 3 km at the extreme western end of the cultivated land. The area under sugar cane amounted to 13.000 hectares and a year before my arrival the decision had been taken to install an overhead irrigation system worth £ 1.7 million. The implementation of the irrigation scheme required a profound knowledge of the soil conditions and that was why I had been hired to map the soils and compile an irrigation capability map. River floods regularly occurred and except for the seaward boundary of the estate, the entire area was enclosed by a flood defence. A mosaic of small rivers, many of which ceased to flow in the dry season, occurred within and beyond the flood defence inland from the main river. In the rainy season these rivers would act as a drainage system carrying excess water south-east ward to the Indian Ocean. An interesting layout was adopted for the whole of the sugar cane lands, with square fields of 16 hectares each separated by 16 meter wide roads which served as access roads and fire breaks. A jeep and narrow gauge railroad system facilitated further transportⁱⁱ.

Growing sugar cane in Luabo was labour intensive and getting this labour, some 8.000 workers during the cropping season, was a continuous headache. Even in 1920, when John Hornung to all intents and purposes was still a *prazo holder* with the right to a monopoly of labour in his territory, an adequate supply of workers was not always guaranteed. The situation became worse when a number of new Labour Codes were passed in the late 1920s replacing the old methods of compulsory labour that had operated since 1899 by a system of volunteer, tax-mobilized labour. When the Colonial Act of 1930 came into force the *prazo holders*, including John Hornung, were required to surrender all their rights - collecting taxes, maintaining a police force, administering justice and compelling labour to work - to the state. Arrangements for recruiting volunteer labour passed from Sena Sugar Estates itself to the Department of Works and Native Affairs and its local representatives such as the Administrators and the *chefes do posto*. These Portuguese officials did not only become responsible for overseeing the free contracts of recruitment made between Sena Sugar Estates and the workers but also had to enforce the specific obligations that went with the contracts. These obligations were many. Housing had to be provided in the form of compounds of single huts of specified dimensions and barrack like housing was forbidden. Clothing, a pair of shirts and shorts, had to be issued to the workers immediately after recruitment and before they began their journey to the sugar estate. Once on the estate, food had to be provided and served at three separate meals: one before work, one issued at noon and a third at the day's end.

Rations had to amount to 800-1000 gm of maize, rice or cassava flour per day, supplemented by 250 gm of meat or dried fish. Working hours were not to exceed nine hours a day for a six-day week, excluding public holidays and where a worker completed his assigned task early, he was to be given no additional work.

Medical services were to be provided free and since Sena Sugar Estates employed more than thousand workers, there had to be a resident doctor. Accidents at work, and they occurred frequently, had to be compensated for with three months' full pay and succeeding months at half pay until the injury had healed or a final gratuity arranged. Compensation was to be paid to relatives of those killed at work. Where transport was available for the voyage from the recruitment area to the estate, Sena Sugar Estates had to pay for it. If recruits had to walk they were to travel under European supervision, no more than 30 km a day, with a rest day for every 100 km travelledⁱⁱⁱ. To obtain its labour on these terms, Sena Sugar Estates employed professional recruiters who toured the villages trying to persuade Africans to except contract work for a period of six months. Recruiters were licensed by the government and could only operate in specific areas. They were, however, forbidden to even imply that they were recruiting for the government and could not pose as representatives of authority which, of course, they invariably ignored.

On basis of the contents of the Labour Codes and the Colonial Act, the Portuguese government was entitled to claim, as it frequently did, that a legal groundwork had been laid for safeguarding Africans' rights. Although workers had indeed a free choice of employer and could chose not to contract their labour if they could obtain money to pay tax by other means, reality was usually different. Authorities at all levels exercised their right to use correctional forced labour for criminals, vagrants and tax defaulters and ordinary forced labour for anyone to provide public services such as roads, canals and bridges. To make matters worse, the obligation of Africans to carry identity cards with details of their employment left them liable to ordinary forced labour under the vagrancy clause if they dared to exercise their right not to work. Work itself was not really rewarding either. Workers would not only spend over half of their six-month contracts simply earning their tax, but were also separated from their families and their villages for prolonged periods of time. Rising sugar and copra prices in the early 1940s resulted in a fierce competition for labour among the plantation companies along the Zambesi and the labour recruiters became even more powerful and corrupt and did not shy away from rounding up every able bodied man they could lay their hands on. Through its recruiters and backed by the Mozambique administration, Sena Sugar Estates acted almost constantly, and at times even flagrantly, in defiance of the Labour Codes and the Colonial Act and the metropolitan government turned a blind eye. Although Sena Sugar Estates was allowed to act in defiance of those sections of the law that dealt with labour recruitment, the sections of the law dealing with the provision of housing, food, clothing and welfare facilities to the workers were rigidly enforced.

After 1945 the situation became even more contradictory. Some of the excesses accompanying the recruitment of labour were curbed, but the system of forced labour itself continued. The Mozambique administration and the metropolitan government found a compromise in leaning even harder on Sena Sugar Estates to ensure that at least those sections of the Labour Codes which concerned the welfare of the workers

were enforced without equivocation. The official food requirements were republished and clarified. In addition to the old rations, 100 gm of groundnuts and 20 gm of salt per person had to be provided^{iv}.

To ensure that workers would not trade their daily portions for tobacco or sell them to Indian store-keepers in Luabo, it was decreed that cooked food was to be issued in the fields. As a result Sena Sugar Estates had no choice but to procure portable mess kitchens and modify them in such a way that they could be installed on railway wagons. By the mid-1950s the supply of food to the workers had become a major logistical effort involving the distribution of 60 tons of maize flour (in the form of hot porridge), 15 tons of meat or fish, 6 tons of groundnuts and 600 kg of salt weekly^v. Also the regulations on compounds were redefined. They were to be provided with refectories and bathrooms with hot water, a sanitary post and with communal wells sealed against pollution. Grass huts were pulled down and rebuilt in brick and fitted with concrete floors, windows and lockable doors. Walls were plastered inside and outside and white-washed once a year. In 1956 food regulations were further extended: fresh fruits and vegetables were added to the diet at the rate of 250 gm per worker daily and as a consequence Sena Sugar Estates was compelled to plant bananas, paw-paws and citrus trees in all its compounds and to buy 15 tons of fresh vegetables weekly.

On a Monday in the last week of January 1966, I found myself supervising the ladling out of maize porridge and the distribution of boiled fish to more than a 1000 workers digging a main drain on the north-eastern boundary of the plantation. The scene was one of ancient Egypt at the time of the Pharaohs. Hundreds of Angurus in tattered old sugar bags stood at the bottom of a six metre deep trench hoeing heavy black clay into reed-baskets. Once the baskets had been filled, other workers would carry them on their heads up the steep slope and discard the clay some 30 metres from the trench. There, another group of workers spread the wet clay evenly over the embankment. Dozens of *capitões* shouted orders and cursed those that did not work fast enough. Now and then one of the workers would take the lead in a song and all along the trench more than a 1000 voices would fall in. In the trench itself, in the midday sun, it was stifling hot and the stench of sweating bodies was almost unbearable. When the *capitões* blew their whistles to signal the arrival of a train with the mess kitchen, everyone would drop his basket and hoe and scramble towards the train. Sitting on the open railway wagons waiting for the food to be distributed, most of the workers chewed pieces of sugar cane and spit out the white fibres when there was no more juice to be extracted. During lunch time, with no one in the trench, I would have the opportunity to set up my theodolite, check the bottom-slope of the trench and put in new markers where necessary. Later in the afternoon, when the tasks had been completed, I would check on the bottom-slope of the trench again.

When, on Saturday morning, the drain had finally been completed and a last survey had revealed that its slope was according to specifications, I asked Muluga to accompany me on the *jigajiga* to the Anguru compound. My request led to some consternation. 'Why would you want to visit the compound of those Angurus, sir?' The Ngoni disdain for the Angurus could be clearly heard in his voice. 'Just out of curiosity and to see how they are housed', I replied. 'Would it be in any way

dangerous?’ Muluga laughed. ‘I don’t think so, sir, but they will surely be scared that you come on some official company’s business’. Muluga was right and our arrival in the compound created quite a stir.

Most of the workers had already showered and exchanged their muddied sugar bags for shorts and stood silently in a semi-circle around us. When Muluga explained that the young *engenhero* from Holland only wanted to see how they were accommodated, the tension broke and we received a friendly welcome. I was shown the citrus orchard, the communal showers, the refectory and the interior of some of the freshly white-washed and brick-built houses. Being too late for dinner at the Clube do Luabo already, I set around the wood fire outside one of the houses, shared some of my precious Dutch pipe tobacco with those who wanted to smoke and drank black tea. When the drums were brought out, we listened for some time to their beating. On my way back to Luabo, sitting on the front bench of the *jigajiga* talking to Muluga and listening to the singing of the ‘pumping boys’ behind me, I felt guilty and pleased at the same time about my paternalistic attitudes.

In March 1966, after spending a couple of weeks in the factory to acquaint myself with the basics of sugar manufacturing, my real work began: establishing a laboratory for soil and tissue analysis and executing a soil survey of 35.000 hectares of sugar cane land. With the assistance of a local contractor I designed a building and found a suitable location just outside the main compound. Selecting laboratory equipment from the piles of catalogues on my desk proved to be more difficult but eventually I was satisfied with the overseas’ order lists. Totting it all up one night I came to the staggering sum total of £ 65.000 and comparing it to my yearly salary of £ 1.000 I was not really looking forward to present the cost estimates to the General Manager^{vi}. Next day the latter leafed through the two manila folders I presented to him. ‘How long will it take the contractor to erect the building?’ ‘When the long rains stop somewhere in May, the contractor says it will take him five months to complete the building, Sir’. He closed the folders. ‘Tell the Chief Purchasing Officer to make sure all the equipment arrives before the end of October and don’t forget to brief your boss when he returns from leave’. Having lunch that afternoon in the Clube de Luabo, I treated myself to a bottle of Dão Tinto much too expensive for *my* budget.

Preparing a master plan for the soil survey was one thing, getting the field work organised quite another. The logistics were staggering. Over 600 soil pits, 1.2 m deep and wide enough to collect samples, had to be dug and refilled after examination. An additional 800 auger holes had to be made and the soil laid out for examination and sampling. In the end I trained four ‘pit crews’ and two ‘auger’ ones. When, after four weeks of preparation, I assembled the survey party in the shunting yard there were 20 labourers, six *capitões*, my own crew of five, including Muluga, six pumping trolleys and a dilapidated old Landrover. When the weather allowed, I would examine and sample eight locations a day and then return to the office to label and store the collected samples until the laboratory was ready and to write my reports. Hardly a week passed without new experiences. Rats for lunch was one of those. Pits were usually dug one day and examined and refilled the other. The labourers loved the bush rats that fell in during the night. By noon they had usually collected a dozen or so and during lunch break they scorched off the hair and buried them under

the open fire until they were done. The bloated and blackened animals looked grizzly, but the meat was surprisingly tasty. Spitting cobras were another experience. Occasionally urgent office work prevented me from visiting pits in time and they would remain open for a week or so.

Particularly in clayey areas the soil profiles would develop deep cracks, making sampling difficult. Standing in such a pit one morning, together with Muluga, I saw a movement from the corner of my eyes. In a reflex I slashed at it with my cane knife and a badly cut cobra fell out of a huge crack. Muluga was quick to finish it off and only then I saw I had cut deep into my foreman's upper arm. Pressing a shirt against the bleeding wound we drove back to the Luabo hospital where a male nurse disinfected and stitched the four inch gash. That afternoon I ordered a snake bite kit from South Africa and in the years that followed we never jumped into a pit again without prodding all the cracks with a stick first.

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- i Vail, L. and White, L., *Capitalism and Colonialism in Mozambique: a study of Quelimane District* (London: Heinemann, 1980, p. 363).
 - ii Lapperre, P.E., *Zambezi Delta Soils for the production of Sugar Cane: their Classification, Morphology and Chemical and Physical Properties* (Agronomia Moçambicana, Revista do Instituto de Investigação Agronómica de Moçambique, Vol. 5, n 4, 1971).
 - iii Vail, L. and White, L., *Capitalism and Colonialism in Mozambique: a study of Quelimane District* (London: Heinemann, 1980, p. 251).
 - iv Ibid, p. 326.
 - v Sena Sugar Estate, Weekly Field Report, Field Manager to General Field Manager, 13th February, 1956.
 - vi One Pound Sterling in 1966 was roughly the equivalent of 6 US\$ in 2002.