

MOZAMBIQUE

Machel's metica still in mothballs

By José Ramalho



Any self-respecting state needs its own currency. The trappings of statehood, including crisp banknotes and shiny new coins, become yet more of a "must" if an offer of instant independence has been

dumped in one's lap when one least expects it.

This was the trick the Portuguese played on unsuspecting Samora Moisés Machel when he was president of Frelimo. Following the Lisbon revolution of April 1974, half-a-dozen Portuguese Marxist officers turned up in Lusaka, Zambia, and told an unbelieving Machel that Mozambique was all his "no strings attached".

At that time, nobody in Frelimo had a clue how to run a country. But, to offset this failing, there was a plethora of ideas on the theatricals of the thing, including flag designs, anthem writing, a slogan for every occasion, the organisation of spontaneous mass demonstrations and, in general, every ruse to keep the people in a daze while destroying a long-established system and trying to figure out what to put in its place.

From the days of the Dar es Salaam cocktail circuit rounds, the Frelimo leaders had been aware that, if and when Mozambique fell into their hands, they would have to come up with a prestige currency. When the Portuguese decided to scramble out of Africa in great haste, the only decision Frelimo had taken on the future currency was its name. It was to be called metica, after mitical, a centuries-old word dating back to the Arab traders who used it in their transactions with the East African tribesmen.

When independence day was getting close, Frelimo officials were dispatched to Britain to place orders for millions of banknotes and coins with the best manufacturers available. The well-known firm of Thomas de la Rue took the order for the banknotes while the Royal Mint saw about the coins, both doing a roaring trade to meet the demands of new states being born all over the place overnight.

It was exciting and Machel could hardly wait. The first crates arrived at the vaults of Banco de Mozambique, in Lourenco Marques, in early 1976, and preparations started at once for the grand launching of the new currency on June 25, the first anniversary of Mozambique's independence.

That was when things started going wrong. Whether by accident or through sheer mischief, one of Machel's aids held a five metica note to the light and, to his horror, the Frelimo president saw his forehead adorned with a majestic pair of horns, showing through from the head of a kudu depicted on the back of the note. Thomas de la Rue declined any responsibility, claiming that proofs had been

Metica: the currency that never was



submitted for inspection and approved by the Frelimo authorities before the notes went to press.

But Machel's woes did not stop there. When everything was ready for the metica to make a grand entrance on the world monetary circuits, a nasty old man, notorious in Lourenço Marques as a spoilsport, dropped a hint that a currency is worthless unless it is backed by gold and foreign reserves. As luck would have it, these were two commodities practically out of supply since independence.

The Ides of June have come and gone three times already since the day when the ill-fated metica was due to see the light of day. And it still remains gathering dust in the underground vaults of Banco de Moçambique.

In the meantime, the best brains in the country, with the wholehearted co-operation of the most progressive minds in the communist world, have been working overtime to find a solution to rescue the forlorn currency from its incommunicado existence.

They all agree that the answer would be to boost exports to pre-independence levels. But this has proved an almost impossible goal as the Mozambican workers, liberated by the Marxist-Leninist revolution, cannot be bothered to pick up the cashew nut, the cotton and tea or to cut the sugar cane – all of them hard currency earners in the colonial days.

Italian communists on loan to Frelimo, last year worked out a foolproof plan to fill in the State coffers with tons of gold and millions in hard currencies, enough to give the metica respectability and acceptance as a full-fledged currency. Their idea: to turn Moçambique into the Las Vegas of the Indian Ocean.

They were not alone in their summing up of the situation. A party of Caribbean tourist experts later confirmed the tremendous potential offered by Moçambique.

As in practically every problem Frelimo has come to face since it assumed power, South Africans were seen as the rescuers. Lourenço Marques has now been out of bounds for South African tourists for more than four years. If the neon lights were to be switched on again in Rua Araújo, the notorious sin street on the waterfront, the flow of rands to the old fleshpots would soon become a flood. As presented to Machel, the plan recommended that entry visas, so far almost unobtainable, would be issued freely by travel agencies in the Republic.

Indeed, the financial attractions of the plan were most tempting. But, although his decision meant the metica would go on gathering dust, Machel would have none of it. As seen by him and the guardians of revolutionary purity, merrymaking on Maputo's streets would be a return to the "West's decadent ways" which Frelimo has vowed to fight to the bitter end.

But, the nasty old man who spoils Machel's fun by acquainting him with the annoying fact that currencies need backing, told only half the truth.

The fact is that the 8 000 million Mozambican escudos in circulation have no backing either as reserves have hit rock bottom.

So, why should he have dashed Machel's cherished dream of having his own metica with his effigy, kudu horns coming through against the light, when metica or escudo are worth the same?