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Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

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Southeast Asia

Curt Gabrielson, a science teacher and an Institute Fellow, is observing the re-establishment of education in East Timor.

An Island Full of Languages

By Curt Gabrielson

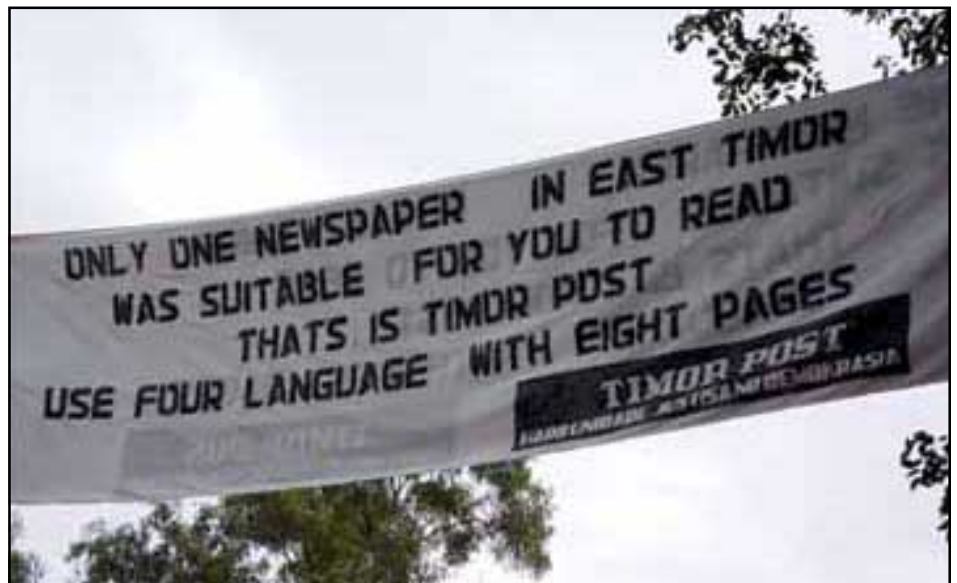
MARCH 4, 2001

DILI, East Timor—I was recently climbing a hill behind the beautiful town of Maubisse in central East Timor when it began to rain. I settled in the shelter of a broken-down house that was home to three happily grunting pigs. Just as I was beginning to enjoy the view, a local man came around the corner of the house, smiled, and said, “How are you?” in flawless English.

I responded and we began a long discussion that we soon carried to his nearby home. It turned out that his English was very limited despite his slick pronunciation. He had been learning it from the foreigners living in Maubisse, and concentrated on imitating their accent.

Antonio was 63 years old. He was unquestionably the most enthusiastic language student I have ever met. He grilled me for over an hour on the usage of various words and phrases he had picked up. When he got a new bit of insight he would squirm with delight. He salivated over my Tetum/English dictionary, and copied from it madly as I dozed in his little kitchen. When the rain let up, he made me promise to stop by again next time I was in Maubisse, and bring him a dictionary if I could.

English is Antonio’s fifth language. As a child he learned Mumbai, the local language of Maubisse, from his parents. Later he picked up Tetum in order to communicate with people from outside the Mumbai-speaking region. In school he learned Portuguese, and after 1975 he learned Bahasa Indonesia¹ in order to



It is a struggle to keep grammar straight when publishing in four different languages.

¹ Bahasa, as the language is commonly called, literally means “language,” and is the official language of Indonesia. It is similar to Malay and spoken across the archipelago. Some proponents of Bahasa in East Timor now are calling it “Malay” in order to reduce the association with Indonesia.

A multilingual T-shirt promoting a civic education campaign recently launched by the UN and several NGOs. From the top: Tetum, Portuguese, English, and Bahasa.



continue his work as a fish merchant. Now, though he is retired, his passion for languages is still going strong. As the political scenery changes again, he can see that English will be extremely important to the future of East Timor.

English is not the only language that will play a part in East Timor's future. In most offices of the UN in East Timor, material for distribution is divided among four boxes, one for each of the main languages in use here: English, Bahasa, Portuguese, and Tetum. The official UN newspaper is published biweekly with separate editions in all four languages. Two other private papers publish articles in all four languages in every issue (though it is the luck of the draw whether or not you know the language of the article you want to read). On the desks of local bureaucrats it is not uncommon to see four or five dictionaries, which they employ to weave the fragile thread of meaning in and out of these four languages.

Communication is a challenging game here, and not just for foreigners. With a population

of only 800,000, East Timor has 17 distinct languages in use, with over 30 different dialects. Whenever two people meet, each has to size up the other and make a guess as to which language to start out with — and always be ready to shift to another if the first one gets no results.

Among the four main languages, English is the least known yet the most popular, due in part to the employment opportunities it brings. Youth generally know Bahasa and older folks will usually know some Portuguese. Tetum is a good bet if you know it, but doesn't get you very far in the east or west ends of the country.

Most interesting to me is the number system. Few people speak numbers in English, but the other three languages are all used widely. The trick is to know which one to use in which situation. I worked hard to learn the Tetum numbers before I arrived in East Timor so I would get better deals in the market. To my surprise, merchants use Indonesian numbers almost exclusively, with Portuguese as a backup for clarification. Many merchants I met did not even understand the Tetum word for ten thousand.² On the other hand, the time is almost always told in Tetum. Age is also, but dates are usually in Portuguese. Bahasa is used for oil grades and wrench sizes, but Tetum is used exclusively when counting people or animals. Portuguese is very common when giving telephone numbers, but Bahasa or Tetum are also acceptable if you say each numeral separately.

Portuguese numbers are the shortest to say by far. Consider the number 32,000, a common price. Portuguese is "Trinta-e-dois mil," pronounced in four syllables.



"Timor suffered and shed blood for Independence." Tetum graffiti in Dili.

² As noted in the last newsletter, most small shops use Indonesian Rupiah, although the official currency is the US dollar. With Rupiah, the least you'll ever pay for something is 500Rp (U.S.\$0.05), so it is necessary to be fluent with very large numbers in order to bargain.

Bahasa is “Tiga pulu dua ribu,” pronounced in eight syllables. Tetum comes in longest with “Rihun tolunulu resin rua,” pronounced in ten syllables and in reverse of the others, saying the word for “thousand” first.

Inefficient number systems tend to die out as more efficient systems displace them. (Have you ever tried doing arithmetic with Roman numerals?) In the same way that Arabic numbers in use throughout the world represent the result of centuries of refinement for use in the industrial world, current languages can rightly be viewed as the bottom line of the entirety of human history. The long history of East Timorese peoples is intricately interwoven with the languages currently in use here.

Tetum is a member of a huge family of languages that stretches literally half way around the world to include Taiwan, Madagascar, New Zealand, Easter Island and Hawaii. The family is called Austronesian, and is named after the great seafaring people who emigrated out of south China and Taiwan around 4,000 years ago to populate, among other places, the Philippines, greater Polynesia, the Malaysian peninsula, the Indonesian archipelago and the island of New Guinea.

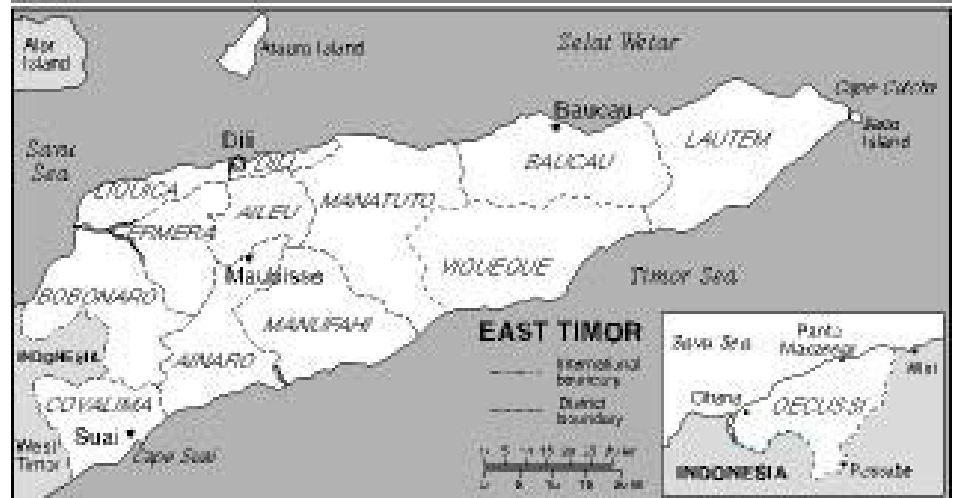
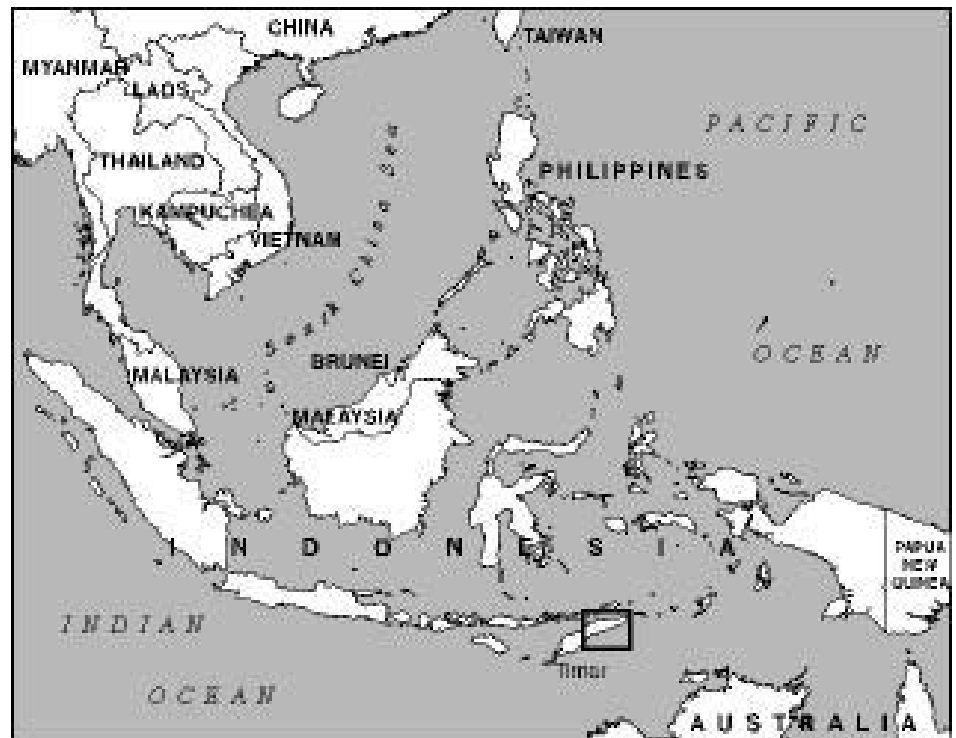
On New Guinea, the Austronesians encountered another group of people who had been residing there in isolation for nearly 35,000 years. It is thought that these original New Guineans arrived on crude rafts and never made the island-hopping trip back across to the Asian continent. Naturally they had their own languages, entirely unrelated to the Austronesians³

Both of these groups eventually made it to Timor and brought their languages with them. Most of the languages of East Timor, like Tetum, are Austronesian, but four important ones are Papuan or Trans-New Guinea languages. The two language groups are mixed geographically throughout the

half-island, and are mutually indiscernible.

Among the various dialects of Tetum, *Tetum Praca*, (also known as *Tetum Dili*) is the one that has been developed and used as a lingua franca. Ironically, it received a great boost as a result of the Indonesian invasion in December, 1975. Portuguese was essentially banned, and thus the Catholic Church had to find another language in which to conduct mass. Great efforts were made to standardize Tetum and create Tetum translations of the Bible and liturgical materials.

Tetum is still used at mass today, and various other efforts have gone into its development and standardization. However, there is yet little coordination among these efforts, and it is very common to see words



³ The same is true for the Australian Aboriginal people. Australia and New Guinea were linked together in a large continent due to a drop in the oceans during the Pleistocene ice age 40,000 years ago. These two peoples were separated when the seas rose again 10,000 years ago.



"Do not play tricks on innocent people." Bahasa graffiti, Dili.

spelled and used differently in different places. Even the Tetum for "East" (meaning "sun-rise") in "East Timor" is spelled variously: "Lorosae," "Loro-sae," "Loro sa'e" and "Loro Sae."

I was not familiar with archaic languages before I began to learn Tetum. I am finding it quite tricky, especially in my field of science education. Many words in use have long been accepted from Portuguese, e.g. "segundu" for second and "fiu" for wire, and for clear reasons: the Portuguese undoubtedly presented the East Timorese with both seconds and wire. With other words taken from Portuguese, it is harder to see the reason. For example, there were most certainly triangles and gravity in East Timor long before European colonization, but the East Timorese I associate with do not know Tetum words for these; they use the Portuguese or Indonesian terms.

I am learning that it is a long, tenuous project to modernize a language. In cases such as the triangle, it may be possible to find and revive an original native word to use as the

was in Bahasa, and textbooks recently printed for the East Timor public-school system are in Bahasa. These textbooks have an East Timorese picture on the cover and a foreword in Tetum, Portuguese, and Bahasa, but the content (except for blatant Indonesian propaganda) is identical to the curriculum used under Indonesia.

The language question is truly contentious in many areas of society. Money, culture, power and politics are all present in the debate around which language or lan-

standard. In other cases, such as e-mail and microscope, it will be necessary to create a new word or borrow from another language.⁴ Bahasa dealt with the same issue earlier in the century, and employed each of these two strategies to attain its present strength and respectability as a widely used modern language. The situation was quite different for Indonesians due to the fact that around 400 million people in several countries speak Bahasa, and a lot more resources were available to put toward its development.

Language modernization aside, it has been necessary for me to learn many words in Bahasa in order to communicate with teachers about science and math. Their education



"Our country was liberated by the Maubere people." Portuguese graffiti and some local residents of Manatuto. Maubere is a popular self-reference for the East Timorese.

⁴ Creating new words in many cases is not difficult due to Tetum's wonderful practice of combining words to form a separate word. For example, "taka-metin," meaning "to lock," is made of two words meaning "close" and "tight." Kerosene is "mina-rai," meaning "grease" and "earth," and drill is "besi-dulas," literally "iron-turn."

guages will be taught in school, and which languages will be official.

The CNRT (*Conselho Nacional Resistencia Timorense*), a coalition organization representing most political parties in East Timor, has declared that Portuguese will be the official language of East Timor. There is great skepticism about this decision, and it is yet unclear whether the CNRT, which is not an official arm of the government, has the political clout to make this declaration a reality.

The ranks of CNRT leadership are filled with persons who have lived in exile in Portugal for the past 25 years. Many are mestizos, with a Portuguese parent or grandparent. In Portuguese times, they were members of the political elite, and in Portugal they remained elite. Today, they still gain much power from their connections in Portugal. Thus, many see CNRT's choice of Portuguese as the official language as purely political. It would strengthen ties to Portugal and solidify the positions of these elite politicians.

The governments of Portugal and Brazil are making great efforts to sustain the Portuguese language in East Timor. Over 200 teachers from Portugal, supported by the Portuguese government, are teaching Portuguese in public high schools here. *Mundo Portugues*, an international Portuguese newspaper, is sent to every post office box in Dili free of charge. A Dili radio station has recently started up with half the programming in Portuguese. And aid money, that great tool of influence, is flowing generously from both Brazil and Portugal.

Father Transfigurasaun, a Catholic priest and principal of the Catholic high school of Baucau, is quite cynical about the decision to make Portuguese the official language. He told me his point of view: Tetum is the language most East Timorese know; English is the international language and the language of Australia, East Timor's close neighbor; Bahasa is a useful trade language of South East Asia that many East Timorese have been speaking for 25 years; so what is Portuguese? It is a very complex language that takes years to learn, is spoken by very few nations (none near East Timor), and is spoken only by Timor's elite and aged. He calls it a stumbling block that East Timor does not need right now. He wryly



English graffiti in Dili thanking INTERFET, the armed UN forces that came in first after the violence of 1999.

remarks that Portuguese can be said to be only the language of the holy spirit, making reference to the fact that the bishops of East Timor (who have enormous power and authority) are pro-Portuguese.⁵

John, a teacher at Suai high school in the southwest corner of the country, told me straight out: "We don't like Portuguese." He estimated that there were probably fewer than 50 people in the whole district of Covalima who could speak Portuguese well, and that students are not interested in learning it. The Portuguese teachers from Portugal, according to John, have been teaching there for six months but have not learned any of the local language, and the students cannot follow their lessons. He said "We like English. All of us want to learn English."

English has its problems, however. Geoffrey Hull, Australian linguist and author of several dictionaries and other books on the languages of East Timor, warns against English as an official language. He calls English an imperialistic, killer language. He counts many countries where English as an official language meant the demise of many indigenous tongues.

In a speech to the CNRT national congress in August 2000, Hull predicted that if Portuguese is not chosen as East Timor's official international language, East Timorese will lose contact with their past, becoming, "a nation of amnesiacs." He feels that Tetum should be the national language, and that Portuguese as an official sec-

⁵ It should be noted that Father Trans speaks perfect Portuguese, is fluent in five other languages (English, Tetum, Bahasa, Makasai and Naueti), and can communicate at a basic level in at least three additional languages (Waima'a, Spanish, and Italian).

Sign on the ailing Indonesian Office of Public Works. Timor is the name of the island, meaning "east" in some local language dating back almost one thousand years to when Chinese merchants first visited the Island. "Timur" means "east" in Bahasa and describes the east end of the island, which Indonesia invaded in 1975 and claimed as their "propinsi," or province.



ond language would serve to uphold Tetum and insure its preservation. He rates Portuguese as by far the best language from which to borrow words for modern usage. He points out that Portuguese has already donated so many words and pronunciations to Tetum that it is easier for East Timorese to learn than English, and that Portuguese has more speakers across the globe than Russian, Japanese, German, or French.

However, many feel that Hull's language plan for East Timor is unrealistic, practically and financially. He has primary students learning in their own vernacular from the onset, studying it alongside Tetum. At third grade, all students would begin to use Tetum exclusively, and begin to study Portuguese as well. By seventh grade, Portuguese would become the language of instruction, and both English and Indonesian would be introduced as compulsory subjects. This means pupils from non-Tetum speaking regions who make it to university would need to study five languages, and primary school teach-

ers throughout East Timor would need to master both Tetum and Portuguese.

In addition, Hull's plan requires enormous government expenditure. Without explanation as to where resources will come from, he calls for a primary school syllabus in Tetum, a public Tetum publishing house, free Tetum-Portuguese dictionaries for all youth, dictionaries and story books in non-Tetum vernaculars, and Tetum and Timorese languages chairs at the national university.

While Hull's plan outlines a beautifully rich linguistic future for East Timor, and the cultural value of preserving languages is unquestionable, today people here are struggling just to communicate with one another. Secondary school teachers I have talked to roll their eyes at the prospect of actually teaching a subject in Portuguese, and point out that after 25 years of Indonesian occupation, many high school students still have trouble understanding Bahasa in textbooks.

The people of East Timor as a whole are proud of their culture and language. I witnessed this pride at a recent conference on sustainable development. An East Timorese was speaking about plans for economic growth. She had lived as an exile in Australia for many years and made her speech in English. The two languages used at the conference (and in many arenas where internationals and locals come together) were English and Bahasa. For some reason the interpreter was having difficulty reading the speaker's speech, which had previously been translated into Bahasa. The speaker did not speak Bahasa, so she offered to translate her own speech into Tetum. A roar of approval went up from the mostly local audience, and she launched into it.

The limitations of Tetum were soon made painfully



"We want Independence, Yes!" Bilingual Graffiti in Bahasa and English. Dili.



An enormous Chinese cemetery on the outskirts of Dili tells of another language spoken widely in East Timor. Comprising around 2 percent of the population, the Chinese have been a continued presence in East Timor since early Portuguese times. Many have connections to South China and Macao, and speak a language called "Kei." This grave is from 1995.

apparent. As she encountered the many technical words necessary to speak about economics, environment and development, she found the Tetum slate blank and struggled to find suitable, universally understandable words in Portuguese or English. Although terribly cumbersome, the speech was completed and the crowd applauded.

Although Tetum is the lingua franca, the number of Tetum speakers is only slightly higher than that of the second largest language (Mumbai). East Timor is com-

posed of a patchwork of small cultures, many fiercely independent, and many with their own language. East Timorese pride and allegiance is often more closely linked to local culture than to the nation of East Timor. East Timor's new government will need to focus on how to find common ground and construct a true national identity. The language policy they choose will undoubtedly have a large role to play in this drama. Meanwhile, I get the distinct impression that most East Timorese, like Antonio, see their multilingual abilities as a valuable asset rather than a problem. □

"Oh, student, exert yourself!" Arabic graffiti suspiciously close to the UN Jordan Battalion on the road to Baucau. There is also a tiny group of Muslims among the diverse population of East Timor that may have penned this encouraging message.



INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS FELLOWS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

Shelly Renae Browning (March 2001- 2003) • **AUSTRALIA**

A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology.

Wendy Call (May 2000 - 2002) • **MEXICO**

A "Healthy Societies" Fellow, Wendy is spending two years in Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec, immersed in contradictory trends: an attempt to industrialize and "develop" land along a proposed Caribbean-to-Pacific containerized railway, and the desire of indigenous peoples to preserve their way of life and some of Mexico's last remaining old-growth forests. With a B.A. in Biology from Oberlin, Wendy has worked as a communications coordinator for Grassroots International and national campaign director for Infact, a corporate accountability organization.

Martha Farnelo (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecker McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine doctoral candidate and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of *Italo/Latino machismo*. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Gregory Feifer (January 2000 - 2002) • **RUSSIA**

With fluent Russian and a Master's from Harvard, Gregory worked in Moscow as political editor for *Agence France-Presse* and the weekly *Russia Journal* in 1998-9. Greg sees Russia's latest failures at economic and political reform as a continuation of failed attempts at Westernization that began with Peter the Great — failures that a long succession of behind-the-scenes elites have used to run Russia behind a mythic facade of "strong rulers" for centuries. He plans to assess the continuation of these cultural underpinnings of Russian governance in the wake of the Gorbachev/Yeltsin succession.

Curt Gabrielson (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**

With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing MIT in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

Peter Keller (March 2000 - 2002) • **CHILE**

Public affairs officer at Redwood National Park and a park planner at Yosemite National Park before his fellowship, Peter holds a B.S. in Recreation Resource Management from the University of Montana and a Masters in Environmental Law from the Vermont Law School. As a John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, he is spending two years in Chile and Argentina comparing the operations of parks and forest reserves controlled by the Chilean and Argentine governments to those controlled by private persons and non-governmental organizations.

Leena Khan (April 2001-2003) • **PAKISTAN**

A lawyer dealing with immigration and international-business law with a firm in the Washington, DC area, Leena will study the status of women under the "islamization" of Pakistani law that began in the 1980s and continues to this day. Born in Pakistan and immersed in Persian and Urdu literature by her grandfather, she is a Muslim herself and holds a B.A. from North Carolina State University and a J.D. from the University of San Diego.

Whitney Mason (January 1998-2000) • **TURKEY**

A freelance print and television journalist, Whit began his career by founding a newspaper called *The Siberian Review* in Novosibirsk in 1991, then worked as an editor of the *Vladivostok News* and wrote for *Asiaweek* magazine in Hong Kong. In 1995 he switched to radio- and video-journalism, working in Bosnia and Korea for CBS. As an ICWA Fellow, he is studying and writing about Turkey's role as nexus between East and West, and between traditional and secular Islam.

Jean Benoît Nadeau (December 1998-2000) • **FRANCE**

A French-Canadian journalist and playwright, Jean Benoît studied drama at the National Theater School in Montreal, then received a B.A. from McGill University in Political Science and History. The holder of several Canadian magazine and investigative-journalism awards, he is spending his ICWA-fellowship years in France studying "the resistance of the French to the trend of economic and cultural globalization."

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Phone: (603) 643-5548
Fax: (603) 643-9599

E-Mail: ICWA@valley.net
Web Site: www.icwa.org

Executive Director: Peter Bird Martin
Program Assistant: Brent Jacobson
Publications Manager: Ellen Kozak

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