

ICWA LETTERS

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The Institute of Current World Affairs
THE CRANE-ROGERS FOUNDATION
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

JBR-10 1997
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John B. Robinson is an Institute Fellow studying the struggle of the people and island of Madagascar to survive.

Hearing the Ones We Love

ANTSIRANANA, Madagascar

June 15, 1997

By John B. Robinson

When the French Legionnaires were stationed in Diego Suarez, known as Antsiranana, the record time between the town and the beach, located half way round the great bay the same size as San Francisco bay, was 17 minutes. The beach is called *ramena*, because when you look across the bay from the town, the eroded clay bluffs above the beach are red — *ramena* means red. Ramena is also the ancient Malagasy color of war and resistance, the colors of the *menalamba*, traditionalists who fought a disorganized campaign of terror against the occupying French in 1896, and one reason the shiny red banner of socialism instantly struck a chord in Madagascar in 1975.

Ramena beach is not much to look at anymore; it was probably never much to look at anyway. It is the standard tropical beach, white sand making a horizontal slash between the ocean's sapphire rays and a backdrop of thrashing green palms. There are about five thousand kilometers of exactly this same kind of beach lining the shores of this Texas-sized island.

Nobody ever thought to live at Ramena before the French came. Now that they are long gone, leaving behind only rusty five-inch naval cannons, some deserted barracks whose clay roof tiles now line many a garden path, and a pot-holed road nobody has fixed for twenty years, there is a small village of fisherman. To serve the fishermen there is one very small store — what would be called a *duka* in East Africa but is called a *hotely* here — run by the daughter of an Arab, Ali Hassan. Ali Hassan has moved away and lets his unbelievably fat (400-plus pounds) daughter run the store by herself. The mother was killed by the military just five years ago while Professor Albert Zafy was still trying to unhorse President Didier ("never say never") Ratsiraka. Ali Hassan ran into the bushes while his wife was menaced, then murdered. He knows who did it, he knows that not one person in the village raised a voice to save her, and so he hates the village. That is why he lets his daughter run



The typical weekend bungalow of an Indian merchant. A house in concrete is the unrealized dream of most Malagasy peasants.



View of Romena beach in front of the village. Note the absence of outboard motors on the boats

the store any way she wants. She is quite merciless.

The French did leave behind something else — they left behind the idea that going to the beach was a privilege and a pleasure. When Indian merchants acquired everything of value after independence in 1960, they also became the owners of a whole mess of beach bungalows. For better or worse they have maintained or rebuilt the weekend shacks, and on Sundays they bounce around the bay shore in chrome-plated 4x4's to flaunt their societal position, and water-ski, jet-ski, or snorkel in front of the subsistence villagers. Naturally there are flareups every once and while. The last one flared when a group of speed-crazy teenagers sliced a gill net into about four pieces when they criss-crossed in an inflatable zodiac driven by an Indian youngster. The fishermen demanded compensation and claimed that the boy's parents insulted them. So the village youths stoned the gleaming cars and broke a couple of thousand dollars worth of irreplaceable windshields. The police came to arrest the owner of the net, the villagers all ran away for the day, and on and on, ectera.

In this unhappy village (now a two-hour ride from town in a taxi *brousse*), whose fisherman rarely venture beyond the confines of the wind-whipped bay, lives an old man who is my friend. He is the only person who speaks Kiswahili with me, and I am the only person who speaks Kiswahili with him. Much of our basic vocabulary is different, as he grew up before WWII in the Comores, and I learned the language in Zanzibar well after the invention of the radio and the VCR. He says "*mchele*" for cooked rice, while I learned five different names for rice — including "*mchele*" for hulled rice, "*wali*" for cooked rice. I have heard this variant before — a common switch made by speakers who have never sat through a schoolbook — and we understand each other.

Our verbs are all the same. We both know "*kula*" means "to eat," and "*kusaidia*" means "to help," and as he is a Muslim I quote Zanzibari proverbs to make him laugh. My favorites, "*Haraka haraka haina baraka*" (Hurry has no blessing) and "*Mungu akipenda*" (If God wishes), always strike home.

He is a very old man and I call him "*mzee*" as I should, a term of respect for his age and his wisdom. Sometimes he

embarrasses me by greeting me with "*Shikamoo*" (I wash your feet). That is supposed to be my line, to which he should respond, "*Maharaba*," (I let you wash them).

He and I meet in the center of his village, or on the beach, or in front of the bungalow he guards for ten dollars a month. He is not afraid to be seen with me because he is too old to care. He is the oldest inhabitant in the village and used to work as a taxi driver. He used to speak English with the Scottish soldiers during the war, and he still communicates in French very well. He talks to his children and the villagers in Malagasy, but now that he is so old, and so close to death, and his wife is dead, all he wants to do is speak his mother tongue and to voyage back to his youth. In these voyages I am his only companion.

I like to sit with him because he is so mortal, so human, so much of an example of a simple person at the end of his life. In his time he committed adultery, lied and drank alcohol, but now his time has come and gone. He has never sat in judgment of any other person; he never committed a murder or stole a loaf of bread. He just tried to stay alive, provide for his family and live until the next day.

I think he likes me because he has seen so many young men similar to me — full of hope, full of ideas that are hardly likely to change the world, rich enough to offer myself a Coca-Cola whenever I want one. And of course I speak his language. In a country where he has passed more than fifty years, he is like me, a stranger.

One morning right after Christmas I took my sons round the bay for a swim at Ramena. Someone had given me an inflatable plastic boat just big enough for the two of them and I was puffing my brains out, trying to blow it up, when the old man sat down beside me. He complimented me on the children and we began talking about fatherhood. At some point Nicolas fell down in the ocean and I ran to grab him before his head plunged under the lapping waves. When I returned, the old man was on his back wheezing for breath. I realized he had tried to blow up the little raft and had nearly died from the effort.

"No problem, no problem," he gasped at me in Kiswahili. "I only wanted to help you with the children."



View of Romena beach that the World Bank hopes will draw between 100 and 200 tourists a day in ten-years time



"Badamera" is the weekend watering hole for expatriates, local musicians and a few adventuresome tourists.

It was an extraordinary act and an extraordinary admission from a old man of his age and position in society. I knew immediately that he was showing his love for me and that he considered me part of his family. I thought about this incident for a long time.

What is it that connects two people, removed by age, religion, cultural mores, skin color (yes, it counts), and education, to love and respect each other? Is it simply the knowledge of the same language? Will I, lost in age and stranded on a distant shore, suddenly strike up a close relationship with a foreigner because he happens to speak English? I think there is more to it than the knowledge of similar vocal sounds. At some level there has to be an acceptance of the other as he is, and a respect for that person without any compromise in dignity.

Last weekend I once again spent the day at the beach with my children. I had not seen the old man for some time and I was not worried about him. He and I live our lives at completely different speeds and our meetings are more by accident than by purpose. We do not look for each other but we know somehow that we will cross paths again and again. To my surprise an adult villager tracked me down and told me, in French, that the "old Islamist" was sick and that he had asked that I be informed.

I immediately walked through the village to find the old man. Architecturally the village is nothing more than the collected remains of an old Navy base. Whatever the French left behind has been put to use. Brass shot canisters hold medicinal flowers, corrugated iron is used for walls and roofs, occasionally a military insignia can be spotted in a smoke-filled room. The alley traversing the village is just a dirty strip of sand a couple of feet wide. Cast-off nylon netting from foreign fishing boats is the main motif. As Independence Day is June 26, a homemade Malagasy flag the size of sheet of typing paper hangs stiffly outside the concrete discotheque.

The old man is sitting just outside his daughter's house. His son-in-law sits just inside, doing nothing. The old man is very weak and unable to rise. Through his t-shirt I see great knobs of rib and shoulder bone poking out.

"Shikamoo," I say

"Marahaba," he responds, clearly vexed he was unable to say "Shikamoo" first.

I sit next to him and he tells me he is very angry. He is seeing red. He wanted to visit the doctor but his daughter told him he could not go if he had no money, and she had none to spare on an old man.

"I am very angry," he repeats. "Before independence I could visit the doctor even if I had nothing. The doctor would give me medicine if I could not pay. Now I will die. Ratsiraka is a blind man who does not see what he steals. He thinks he is stealing money and gemstones. No, he is stealing blood. He has stolen my health. He is a thief and a murderer."

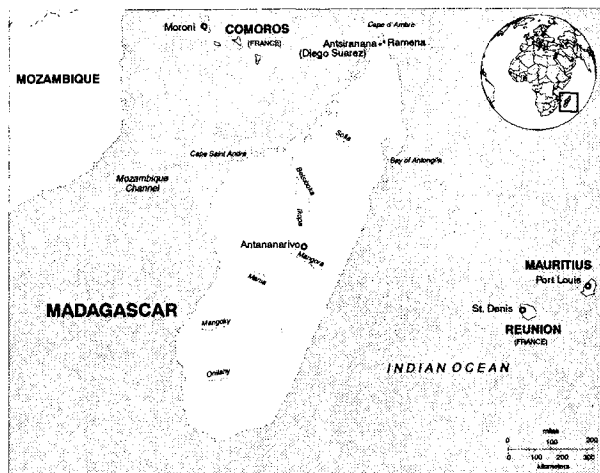
I was shocked to hear the old man criticize Ratsiraka. Very few people — out of fear or out of respect, I can never quite be sure — will criticize the President. But the old man repeated his point a third time, and I knew he believed what he was saying. Except for the politicians and a smattering of left-wing intellectuals, every person I have spoken to in Madagascar who was alive during the time of the French colony says the same thing — "It was better then." Hardly a reason to celebrate June 26.

I stayed with the old man for only a short time. It was very difficult to see him so broken down and helpless. I gave him a great wad of paper money and I returned later to give him a cotton sweater. I told him that if he died I would be unhappy and I wanted him to see a doctor and to get some medicine. I quoted the Koran to pick up his spirits. He stirred a little then — happy, I think, that I cared for him as much as he once showed he cared for me.

"I won't die," he said finally. But I knew he would, and I know I will, and I hope when the time comes, as it must, I do not die a stranger among the ones I love, speaking a language no one can hear.

"Good-bye, old man," I said.

"We will see each other again," said the old man. □



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Institute Fellows and their Activities

Adam Smith Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is studying and writing about the republics of Central Asia, and their importance as actors within and without the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. Degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Christopher P. Ball An economist, Chris Ball holds a B.A. from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and attended the 1992 International Summer School at the London School of Economics. He studied Hungarian for two years in Budapest while serving as Project Director for the Hungarian Atlantic Council. As an Institute Fellow, he is studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

William F. Foote. Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of free-market reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics. Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain. He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the *Buenos Aires Herald* from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

John Harris. A would-be lawyer with an undergraduate degree in History from the University of Chicago, John reverted to international studies after a year of internship in the product-liability department of a Chicago law firm and took two years of postgraduate Russian at the University of Washington in Seattle. Based in Moscow during his fellowship, John is studying and writing about Russia's nascent political parties as they begin the difficult transition from identities based on the personalities of their leaders to positions based on national and international issues. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Marc Michaelson. A program manager for Save the Children in The Gambia, Marc has moved across Africa to the Horn, there to assess nation-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and (conditions permitting) availing and unavailing humanitarian efforts in northern Somalia and southern Sudan. With a B.A. in political science from Tufts, a year of non-degree study at the London School of Economics and a Master's in International Peace Studies from Notre Dame, he describes his postgraduate years as "seven years' experience in international development programming and peace research." [sub-SAHARAN AFRICA]

Randi Movich. The current John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, Randi is spending two years in Guinea, West Africa, studying and writing about the ways in which indigenous women use forest resources for reproductive health. With a B.A. in biology from the University of California at Santa Cruz and a Master of Science degree in Forest Resources

from the University of Idaho, Randi is building on two years' experience as a Peace Corps agroforestry extension agent in the same region of Guinea where she will be living as a Fellow with her husband, Jeff Fields — also the holder of an Idaho Master's in Forest Resources. [sub-SAHARAN AFRICA]

John B. Robinson. A 1991 Harvard graduate with a certificate of proficiency from the Institute of Kiswahili in Zanzibar, John spent two years as an English teacher in Tanzania. He received a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Brown University in 1995. He and his wife Delphine, a French oceanographer, are spending two years in Madagascar with their two young sons, Nicolas and Rowland, where he will be writing about varied aspects of the island-nation's struggle to survive industrial and natural-resource exploitation and the effects of a rapidly swelling population. [sub-SAHARAN AFRICA]

Teresa C. Yates. A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a juris doctor from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. [sub-SAHARAN AFRICA]

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Author: Robinson, John B.
Title: ICWA Letters-SubSaharan Africa
ISSN: 1083-429X
Imprint: Institute of Current World Affairs,
Hanover, NH
Material Type: Serial
Language: English
Frequency: Monthly
Other Regions: East Asia; Mideast/North Africa;
Europe/Russia; South Asia;
The Americas

ICWA Letters (ISSN 1083-429X) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

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