

ICWA LETTERS

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SUBSAHARAN AFRICA

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

Individualism: The Downfall of Madagascar

ANTSIRANANA, Madagascar

December 19, 1997

By John B. Robinson

Since the Malagasy political elite recovered the independence of their country in 1962, Madagascar has gradually become one of the ten poorest nations on earth; proportionally, more of its citizens die of malnutrition, disease, and ignorance than almost anywhere else on the planet. There have been no wars, only four changes of government, and a massive influx of aid and technical assistance from countries with as diverse ideological positions as France, England, North Korea, Communist China, the ex-USSR and the United States. The only way to explain the current catastrophe is to understand Malagasy culture. For it is Malagasy culture, the Malagasy way of perceiving the world and reacting to it, that is responsible for the present state of affairs.

There is a national, identifiable Malagasy culture. All eighteen tribes live together in a defined space surrounded by an impassable barrier (the Indian ocean). All are represented in and policed by a recognizable central authority, all worship their ancestors, all use strict taboos to guide behavior and all tribes speak languages rooted in the same linguistic structure. These are the common cultural characteristics that transcend specific tribe or living conditions on this, vast island.

I believe that Malagasy individualism is the cause of Madagascar's permanent chaos and unending poverty. The physical isolation of Madagascar from the rest of the planet is an important factor in this culturally created individualism, which is so fierce that all is laid to waste before the individual drive for power (linked to wealth), fertility and ancestral glorification. As individuals of the same class and age group are always in competition with each other, progress is possible only along family lines, not community ones. The result is chronic underdevelopment at a national level.

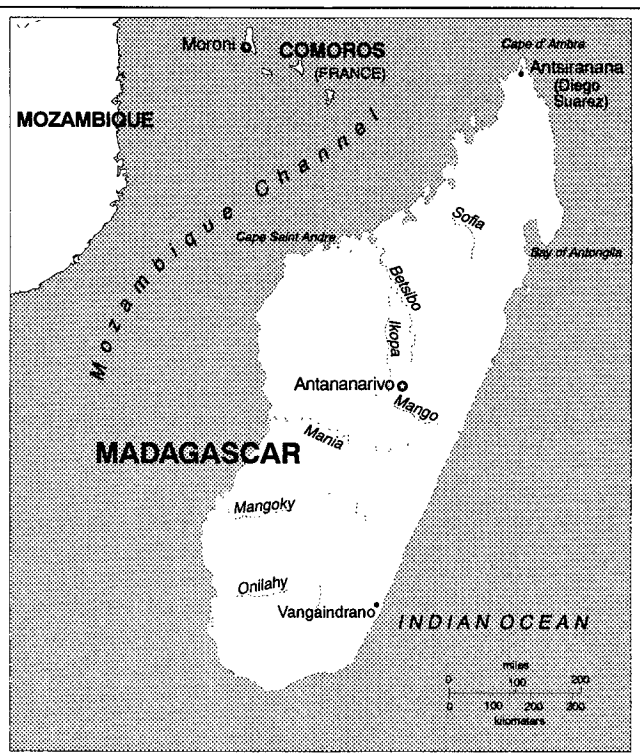
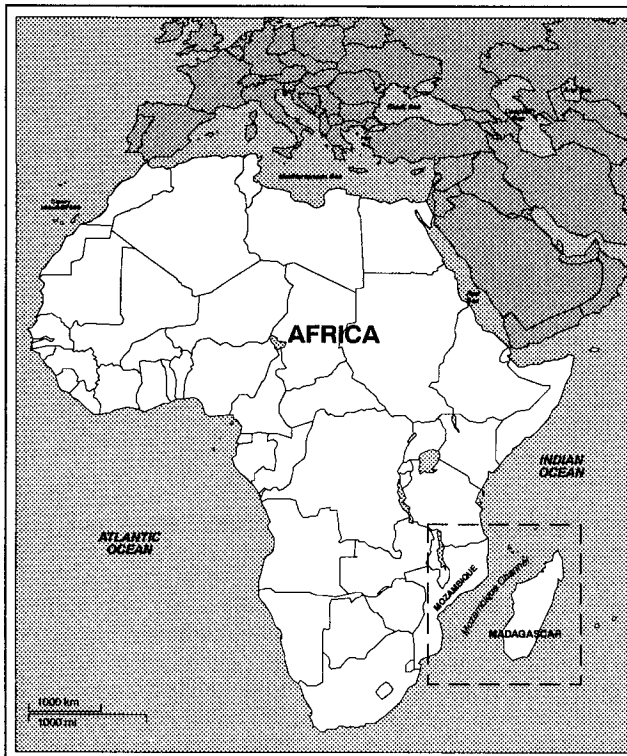
THE FORCES THAT CREATE, SHAPE AND PRESERVE INDIVIDUALISM

Three interrelated forces work to create and preserve Malagasy individualism. They are 1) Physical Isolation. 2) The Cult of Ancestry. 3) The Caste System.

Physical Isolation

Madagascar's physical location has determined all its history. Ever since it separated from Africa 200 million years ago, the treacherous waters of the Mozambique Channel have cut off nearly all plant, animal and human communication from the mother continent. The island's flora and fauna developed peacefully in the absence of large predators, venomous snakes or man. When mankind did reach the shores of the red island about 1500 years ago, the most numerous immigrants came in canoes launched from Indonesia. Those who survived the 5000-mile voyage never returned to their place of origin in quantifiable numbers. Contact with Africa, only two hundred and fifty miles away, has remained sporadic and limited in scope for the last millennium. The end result of the island's odd position off the southeast coast of Africa is that it has neither natural enemies nor trading partners.

It is impossible to overestimate the effect of physical isolation on the island and its inhabitants. Unlike some island cultures that turned outward from themselves, like the fighting sailors of the British Empire or the slave-trading Sultans of Zanzibar, the Malagasy look inward, to themselves and toward the interior of their island. It is logical, then, that the national capital of Madagascar is marooned on seven hills set in the geographic



center of the island, and the largest port is merely a gateway to its riches.

The most important topographical feature of Madagascar is the immense plateau that runs the length of its spine. Those who live on the plateau are known as Highlanders, and all those who live off the plateau are known quite simply as *Côtiers* (coastal people). The constant fight for political, spiritual, and commercial power between the Highlanders and the *Côtiers* has divided the island into competing camps since as long as anyone now alive can remember. The result of this competition is that not only are the Malagasy isolated from the world at large, but largely from each other as well.

The physical separation of one part of the island from another, and one village from another, leads me to wonder if the Malagasy are not profoundly isolated as individuals. Even in small villages, where everybody knows each other extremely well, the indifference they show toward one another when it involves a community issue such as clean water, health or education, is startling. Well-digging projects, or health dispensaries, often collapse because villagers are unable to work in unison — which must lead to feelings of resentment, frustration and loneliness.

The most dramatic effect that physical and cultural isolation has had on the Malagasy as a nation is their inability to respond to outside emergencies such as invasion, world war or epidemics. The Malagasy are incapable of accepting either positive solutions or negative penalties toward sane development. If a brave new idea does not rise from within the culture itself, or is not fully understood by all the Malagasy involved, its efficacy has limited power and a short duration.

The Ancestral Cult

The Malagasy do not just worship their ancestors, they live with them. A corner of the house is kept sacred, offerings are

given at every meal, expensive ceremonies are performed frequently to appease their spirits and powerful taboos are passed from generation to generation. The introduction of Christianity, Islam and Buddhism have not changed the role of the ancestors in any significant way because the ancestors are an ingrained part of the culture as well as a religious belief.

The most important thing in Malagasy life is to maintain one's position in relation to one's ancestors. The great worry of a young man is to do better than his father, which would be shameful and bring down the wrath of the ancestors. And as the ancestors are always present, and punish the transgression of their laws themselves, any personal initiative must be carefully considered. It is always safer to do nothing than to do something.

This cultural abhorrence of initiative translates into one very obvious trait. The Malagasy are incapable of making a clear demand; hence, like the ancient Greeks, they value great orators above other men. A great orator is one who uses proverbs, ornate language, and drawn-out conversation to talk around the heart of an issue without ever causing offense. In the highly ritualistic and culturally crucial *kabary* (a type of open air forum to discuss important events or issues that can last all day in the blazing sun), the chief orator will spend about a third of his time excusing himself before the ancestors for the impertinence of the things he is about to say.

The role of the ancestors in Malagasy life and thought is well documented in hundreds of books and articles written across the centuries. The catastrophic results of the ancestors' injunctions, however, are the modern disaster that now concerns people outside Madagascar. Traditional slash-and-burn agriculture is wiping out the last biologically important forest reserves on the island. In those areas where the forest has long since disappeared, rice planting using traditional methods is producing ever-lower yields due to ancestral resistance to new methods. Stunted and malnourished children are the rule in

rural communities where taboos prevent women from breastfeeding long enough or even varying their household menus to accommodate the needs of a growing infant. The choice between buying foreign medicine and letting a parent, sibling or child join the ancestors frequently leads to a great funeral feast. And the tombs themselves, which are the pride of any clan, lord it over the inadequate huts of the living.

The worst thing that can happen to any Malagasy person is to be cast out of his or her family tomb. This can happen by marrying incorrectly, breaking a strict taboo or committing an unforgivable crime such as murder or incest. Between 50 percent and 80 percent of a person's lifetime earnings are spent on the support of the ancestors, and the Malagasy live and die for ancestral benediction.

The Caste System

Although 65 years of colonialism destroyed the legal power of the caste system, its echo still resounds in Madagascar today. The feudal caste system puts individuals of the same caste and the same generation, in permanent competition with each other.

Every tribe has a system of castes, and although their origins and names vary, castes are an incontrovertible part of life. In general there are four castes: Noble, freeman, servant, and slave (or pariah). As opposed to the Hindu belief in reincarnation, there is no way to change caste, ever. A person lives in his or her ancestral state as he or she lived in their life on earth. The descendant of a slave remains a slave, and so do all his descendants for time eternal.

At the center of the caste system is a person with two living parents. She can never compete with them, because she owes them her eternal respect. Neither can her children compete against her. Therefore she has a place in her caste between her parents and her children. Within this strict boundary she is in permanent competition with all her other siblings for affection, food and money. For example, in a family of eight children, the oldest has the best chance of surviving. Since she is older she may go to school first, or receive vital medicine that is unavailable for later arrivals, or be in a position to defend her plate more adroitly than a weaker sibling. Two children of the same father, though they be born 40 years apart by different women, are in competition. Thus, if they live in the same house, or even in the same village, it is in the interest of the 40-year-old sister to keep the youngster as ignorant and unhealthy as possible, for when she is old, the younger sibling will take her place and may withhold the same from her.

That being said, the family is the most important social unit in Madagascar. All important decisions involve the whole family. The oldest male is the patriarch, and to disobey his orders is a grave social infraction. A family lives within its caste, mixing only with others of the same social status after work. As the Malagasy power structure is dominated by men, being the son or grandson of a certain person fixes your own place in the system. Thus political observers need to understand whose father did what if they want to know how ministerial and ambassadorial appointments will fall. The century-old cliché that Madagascar is dominated by 200 families is still a political reality.

In everyday terms, the caste system means that any two people of the same generation, in the same service (Education, Police, Agriculture, Mining, etc.), are always in fierce competition with each other, and with those in other services as well.

The result is a government administration divided into 35 competing ministries, each seeking the favor of the President (or the king, in other times).

The caste system complicates the actual process of governing. Very often a common-caste bureaucrat from one tribe is sent to carry out governmental directives that affect the wealth or well-being of another tribe's nobles. Naturally the bureaucrat is ostracized from the local community and ignored, and although he may send in glowing reports from the field, which are in turn used as a basis for international loans, nothing ever happens. Road-building projects often suffer this fate, as local kings and nobles are not always anxious to be in contact and competition with other tribal leaders.

One byproduct of the caste system is the rise of enormously wealthy Chinese and Indo-Pakistani merchants. The merchants have used their position as resident outsiders (a role formerly played by French colonials) to provide services too base for a high-caste person, too expensive to manage for a commoner, or too much in contact with others for a descendant of a slave. In revenge, the Malagasy frequently refuse to give the merchants passports or resident cards despite generations of life in Madagascar. A Malagasy is a Malagasy through the caste of his ancestors; an outsider and his descendants remain outsiders (one reason many merchants have foreign passports).

The caste system works to fracture Malagasy society. During President Didier Ratsiraka's first reign he sought to transform Malagasy society along communal, communist lines. He failed miserably and every once in a while I will run into people left adrift in the wake of the system's hopes. The most blatant example was a *Côtier* I met in Antalaha. He had spent five years in Kiev learning aeronautical engineering. He spoke Russian, French, English and the official highland Malagasy (not to mention his own Antankarana dialect). He had worked in Europe, and he was now serving Cokes to tourists in a rundown hotel. His name was Joarivo (the descendants of Joa being the traitors who gave away the Antankarana king to the highland Merina a century ago). He had no father, no connections, and absolutely no future. In a country where only four percent of the population has ever been to secondary school, the loss of his talents is a community loss.

CONCLUSION

In Madagascar, it is the supremacy of the individual but not the community, the existence of a modern society with individual rights but not individual obligations, that is the root cause of the society's problems. Due to isolation, ancestral beliefs and irradicable social castes, the Malagasy find themselves alone against others of their own kind. Instead of trying to help their neighbors, they try to exploit them. Instead of building schools for the community, the richest send their own children off to private institutions. Instead of training doctors and investing in hospitals, the Malagasy pray that they will not fall ill.

As long as the Malagasy cannot solve their social problems, they will be unable to solve their economic ones and the poverty will continue indefinitely. The current privatization of state industries will not save Madagascar. Quite the contrary, it will concentrate economic power in the hands of a few socially powerful nobles. The only way to challenge the culture of greed, selfishness and dishonesty in Madagascar today is to expose the flaws of the self-centered culture to the outside world. Madagascar's recent opening to foreigners is the first step. □

The Institute of Current World Affairs

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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]

Chenoa Egawa. An enrolled member of the Lummi Indian Nation, Chenoa is spending two years living among mesoAmerican Indians, studying successful and not-so-successful cooperative organizations designed to help the Indians market their manufactures, agricultural products and crafts without relying on middlemen. A former trade specialist for the American Indian Trade and Development Council of the Pacific Northwest, Chenoa's B.A. is in International Business and Spanish from the University of Washington in Seattle. [THE AMERICAS]

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-SAHARA]

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-SAHARA]

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-SAHARA]

Daniel B. Wright. A sinologist with a Master's Degree in International Relations from the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University, Dan's fellowship immerses him in southwest China's Guizhou Province, where he, his journalist-wife Shou Guowei, and their two children (Margaret and Jon) will base themselves for two years in the city of Duyun. Previously a specialist on Asian and Chinese affairs for the Washington consulting firm of Andraea, Vick & Associates, Dan also studied Chinese literature at Beijing University and holds a Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary of Pasadena, California. [EAST ASIA]

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-SAHARA]

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