

ICWA LETTERS

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

Chez Henriette

ANTANANARIVO, Madagascar

October 1, 1996

By John B. Robinson

Henriette is alone. She runs a bed and breakfast in Joffreville. She used to run it with Xavier, but as he is no longer around, she runs what's left by herself.

Xavier, like nearly all French people who try to start a small business in Madagascar, was from the third or fourth tier of the social hierarchy. The only reason I can't place him any lower is that he didn't seem to have any addictions, he was able-bodied and he liked to work. Here in Mada, he worked as a travel agent, a rice transporter, a restaurateur, a taxi brousse driver, a bed-and-breakfast owner. Back in France, he could work as much as he liked, but his station in life was fixed.

He was an abandoned child. An orphan with two living parents. His father went off to fight the last bad fight of colonialism in Algiers; his mother cut her losses (Xavier, age 2) and remarried. At 14 he ran away from the orphanage, lived in the food markets around Paris, stole. At 16, he learned to work, and learned that he liked to work. With his pay he traveled around Europe, spent enough time in Germany to speak the language, visited Piccadilly Circus in May, Pamplona in August. The more he saw of the world, the more he realized what a miserable lot had befallen him, and the more he resolved to change his position in life.

"Xavier came to Madagascar because it was cheap, he was white, and with a little money and a white skin you can do something in this country."

When Madagascar was a French colony, his type came here as gendarmes, soldiers or legionnaires. Their officers drove them hard, and after a certain time, when the young, illiterate brutes came to believe in the system, they were set free to go about their business: solid, conservative, *petit bourgeoisie*. The ones who didn't bend to the stick were usually sent to remote lookout posts where they died of preventable illnesses. The French colonial system was like the English Empire in that respect; only the young people with no place in the social system at home went abroad.

So what was Xavier doing in the Republic of Madagascar in 1996? For the last twenty-odd years this island country has been positively anti-French. In 1973, Admiral Didier Ratsiraka rose to the Presidency, kicked the French navy out of the port city of Diego Suarez, embraced the USSR, and learned how to run a small third-world country, Soviet style. To remove Ratsiraka from power 17 years later, the entire country embarked on a general strike that lasted eight months. Trucks didn't deliver gasoline, telephone operators didn't connect calls, workers went without salaries, bread wasn't baked. After the penury had killed thousands by starvation, the monster gave in and appointed a provisional government. Political activists came out of their safe houses, arrested journalists were thrown out of their cells, the whole country was reborn under the charismatic leadership of Professor Albert Zafy.

Xavier came to Madagascar because it was cheap, he was white, and with a little money and a white skin you can do something in this country. His dream



Taxi Brousse

to live in Madagascar, marry a local beauty (thereby neatly avoiding the interminable visa problems), make his fortune, raise a family and have a home, is typical of a whole class of Frenchmen who come here.

Taken as a group, these Frenchmen come from the housing projects outside of Paris, problematic French possessions like La Réunion, Tahiti or New Caledonia, the deep countryside in the Luberon, Vaucluse or the Haute-Savoie. Before they arrived in Madagascar, they were waiters, construction workers, mechanics,

cooks, and ordinary peasants. Once in Madagascar, with their contacts abroad and little else of value, most became involved in the black market for hard currency, endangered species, gold, gemstones and other transportable goods. They generally have nothing to lose and little fear that they will spend time in a Malgasy prison cell. In the most flagrant cases they are simply expelled from the country, although I met an Italian of the same genre who had his expulsion annulled.

When I say a little money, I mean two thousand



*Chez Henriette,
sign on front wall*

dollars or less. Enough money to travel the county in a taxi brousse, eat standing up at the roadside. Not enough to stay in hotel rooms with mosquito nets, or enough to buy a car, a tractor or a mud hut. Enough, nevertheless, to start a small business, or work for someone else until an opportunity presents itself.

Xavier's first job was with a travel agent. *Le patron*, another questionable Frenchman, hired him to train the personnel and look officious. After three months, *le patron*, who was only paying him room and board until the company broke even, handed him a plane ticket Antananarivo - Paris, and told him to get the hell out. No back pay, no bonus, no visa.

This is where Henriette enters the story. She is working as a cashier in Xavier's favorite discotheque. He asks her if she knows of a place to stay for the night, she happens to have an extra room, etc. Point being, Xavier, cheated out of his salary, has no way to get from Diego Suarez to Antananarivo to Paris, and no particular reason to return to The Hexagon anyway. He has nothing and nowhere to go.

Henriette, attracted by the opportunity Xavier represents, shelters him, quits her job, and the two of them go into the transportation business during the harvest season. Using a borrowed truck, they buy rice at 250 fmg (franc malgash), they transport 20 tons a load into town, and they sell it for 1250fmg. Each trip earns them 200,000 fmg — U.S.\$50. With their profits

they buy an ancient Peugeot 404 and make a taxi brousse. This is after the troubles of Ratsiraka, before Zaf Albert turned out to be a complete zero. Taxiing peasants and poultry from place to place on back roads gains them enough to sell the vehicle and open a restaurant. With Xavier's white face out front, backpackers and 30-40-year-old adventure tourists stop in. Things look good. Henriette and Xavier get married, have kid #1, sell the restaurant, and invest in their dream — a bed and breakfast in Joffreville.

"At the time of the French colony, many Frenchmen considered Joffreville paradise on earth. I suspect Xavier wanted some of history's prestige to rub off on his venture."

Joffreville was created by Marshal Joffre at the turn of the century as a military headquarters and health sanitarium. The view overlooking the northern tip of Madagascar is commanding. From Joffreville you can see the Mozambique Canal to the left, the

Cap d'Ambre straight ahead, the enormous bay of Diego Suarez below, and the Indian Ocean to the right. The air is pure. Ocean winds brush the humidity away, the forest vines keep the ground lush and well watered and the height assures a certain freshness on even the hottest days of the dry season. At the time of the French colony, many Frenchmen considered Joffreville paradise on earth. I suspect Xavier wanted some of history's prestige to rub off on his venture.

The town itself is not much to look at any more. Perhaps 40 years ago, when the Colonels and Colonial Administrators whitewashed their villas and



Joffreville center



The author, with son Nicolas, at National Park Waterfall (left); Park entrance (above).

scrubbed their stone verandahs, it might have been something to see. For the moment, tropical decay has set in. Old mansions, like "Corsica Bella," with its terraced gardens, enclosed aviary, transparent fish tanks, wooden clapboard siding and shuttered balconies, are in total ruin.

Still, Joffreville has *something*. The national park, which now protects what is left of the trees, does attract some visitors. Even though the park's facilities are pathetic (a few kilometers of old road turned into "nature walks," a metal gate with a guard post), the old-growth rain forest itself is quite majestic. Sailors from the French Navy, or merchant seaman with nothing else to do, usually make the trip. Now and then a backpacker will pass, but the well-heeled tourist is a rare bird around Joffreville.

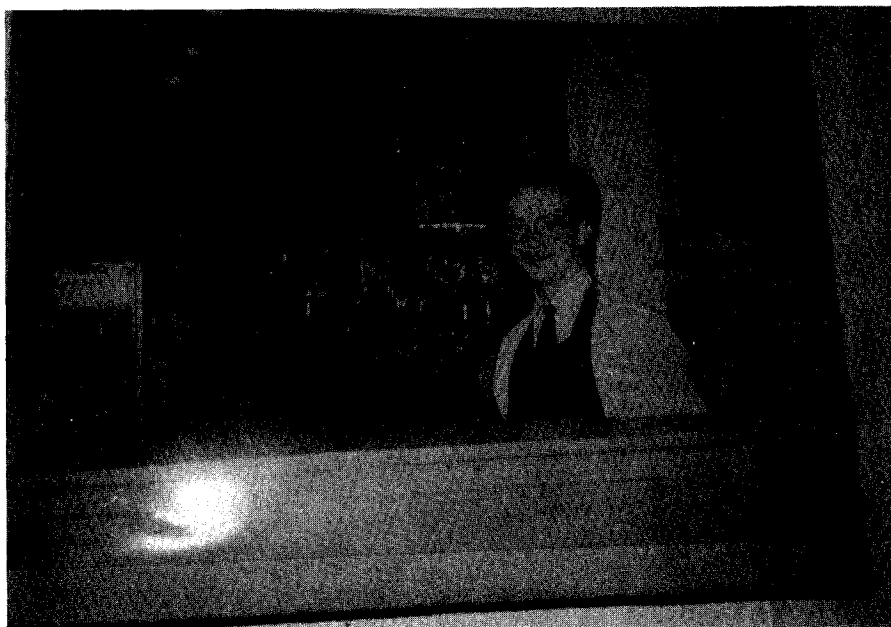
Henriette and Xavier leased a tiny stone house facing the road to Diego Suarez. There is no view; the two guest rooms are dark and stale; there is a miniature yard out back. It could be an old refuge, lost somewhere in the Pyrenees. They fixed the roof with corrugated iron, whitewashed the molding walls, waxed the hardwood floor, painted the door and window frames. They had a refrigerator, a

stove, three tables, two extra beds. When they had spent their last franc malgash, they were ready to receive guests Chez Henriette.

Within weeks of opening, disaster struck. The lease that they had signed, it seemed, was false. They had no right to occupy the premises, and no right to the value of their improvements. This too is a typical story, especially around Joffreville.

When the French lost their rights to own property in Madagascar, some of them left the country with the titles in their pockets, some sold their land to Indo-Pakistani merchants for the price of a stale baguette, some gave their properties to Malagasy friends in parting conversations. Since that time, establishing land ownership in Madagascar has been a nightmare. Squatters sometimes occupy houses for a lifetime; on the contrary, real owner-occupants are often cheated out of their property by illegitimate claimants. The oral nature of most village inheritances complicates things even further. Nearly all leases seem to end up at the tribunal at one time or another, and as they say here, if it gets to the tribunal, it is better to pay the judge than an expensive lawyer.

The lease for Chez Henriette was signed by the real owner's sister. Whether she purposely set Xavier and Henriette up for a fall, or if her brother is



Xavier

really the owner, remain open questions. The end result is that Xavier and Henriette renovated a building that they had no apparent legal right to occupy in the first place, and the "landlord," once he saw the improved condition of his building, suddenly wanted it back.

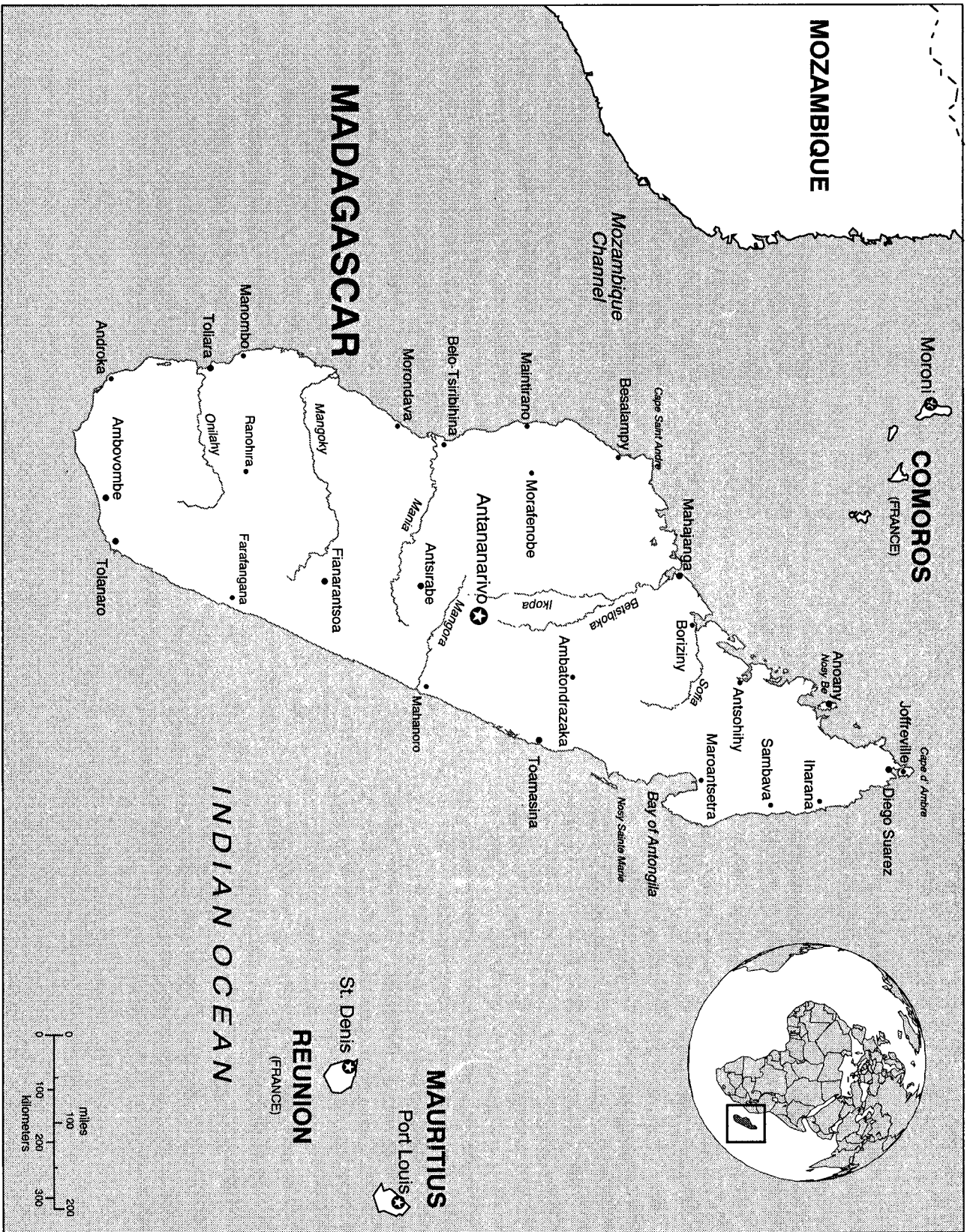
Faced with the prospect of starting all over again, from zero, with no money, and no means to get any, Xavier sank into depression. Like many former bartenders, he rarely touched alcohol. The night of August 30th, however, filled with self-loathing and anger, he went on a drinking binge with another Frenchman in Diego Suarez. Upon his return to Joffreville, he beat his wife, struck his three-year-old child, smashed furniture against the walls. Henriette locked herself and young Nicolas in the guest room; Xavier went into the other guest room, fashioned a noose from some loose rope, and hung himself.

When I ate lunch *chez* Henriette two weeks ago, she was full of troubles. She had given up the idea of fighting her expulsion at the tribunal; she had de-

cided to stay put. She had thought of returning to her family, but they disgusted her. Upon hearing the news of Xavier's suicide, they stopped in, not to console her, not to help, but to take the refrigerator. "We can use it," they said. She threw them out.

Henriette doesn't have time to listen to politicians. She doesn't care that President Albert Zafy was impeached and resigned from office on September 5th, that Admiral Ratsiraka is returning from France to run in the next presidential election, that the election date is being manipulated for the benefit of one party or another, that decentralization is the big issue.

Like most everybody in Madagascar, Henriette is living from day to day. Hoping a wayward sailor will stop in for lunch, a stranded backpacker will spend the night. She needs every Malgasy franc she can find. She has no husband, a predatory family and one three-year-old child. Due to her nervous anxiety she miscarried her second child last week. The expulsion order hangs over her head like a guillotine. □



Institute of Current World Affairs

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 spending two years studying and writing about Turkey and Central Asia, and their importance as actors the Middle East and 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]

Sharon Griffin. A feature writer and contributing columnist on African affairs at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Sharon is spending two years in southern Africa studying Zulu and the KwaZulu kingdom and writing about the role of nongovernmental organizations as fulfillment centers for national needs in developing countries where governments are still feeling their way toward effective administration. [sub-SAHARA]

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]

Pramila Jayapal. Born in India, Pramila left when she was four and went through primary and secondary education in Indonesia. She graduated from Georgetown University in 1986 and won an M.B.A. from the Kellogg School of Management in Evanston, Illinois in 1990. She has worked as a corporate analyst for PaineWebber, an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators, and manager of a \$7 million developing-country revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle. Pramila is tracing her roots in India, and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

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]

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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