

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.

The Place Where I Live

ANTISANANA, Madagascar

February 15, 1997

By John B. Robinson

Zippering beneath the English channel in a bullet train, I imagined Madagascar connected to Africa by a similar tunnel. Passengers, unconstrained by borders, would be free to traffic red gold, gemstones and endangered species. Mercenaries on tourist visas would slip past immigration officers unconcerned with petty bribes and passport controls. They would get off at the Comores and deposit money in obscure bank accounts before humming away to the latest conflict in central Africa.

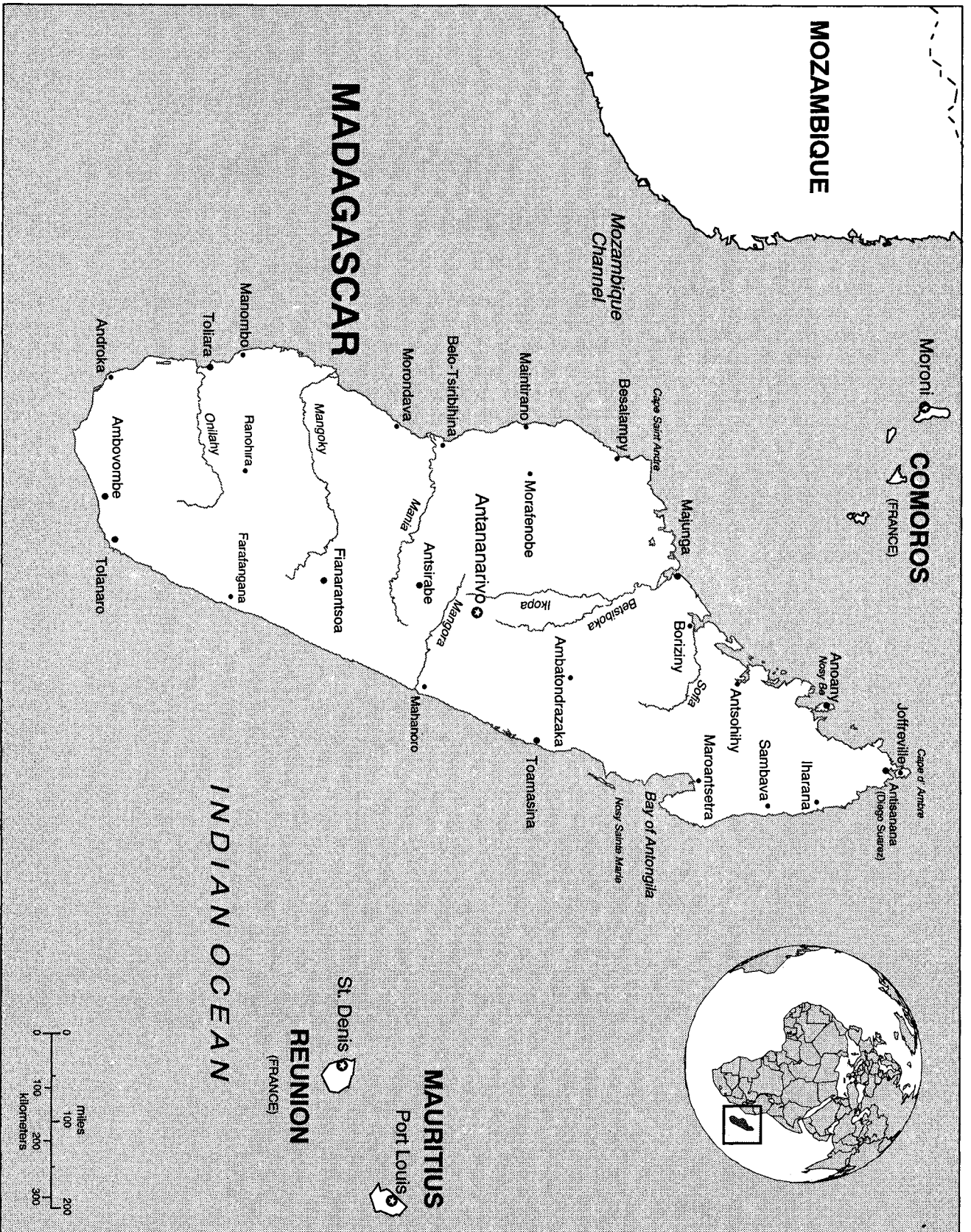
My thoughts were a little bit scattered, to say the least, but ten days in London, my first trip outside Madagascar in six months, will do that to a person. For ten days I had spoken English, visited museums, gone to the theater, eaten impossibly refined meals in rarefied elegance. Culture shock is a mild term for the physical and mental dislocation to which I subjected my entire being.

"Botanical gardens can conserve plants and seed banks may preserve the last remaining grains of an extinct species, but nothing can replace the environment from which it comes."

While I was away from Madagascar, the former dictator had become President-elect by winning the vote count by the slimmest of margins. I read about it in a

little blurb in the *Herald Tribune*. My wife was kind enough to fax me a message saying there had been no riots where we lived, but armored cars were rumored to be circulating through the streets of the capital, Antananarivo. In London, in Paris, in the train connecting these two great cities, no one cared. Madagascar has no nuclear bombs, no planes for its Air Force, no ships for its Navy, no boots for its soldiers. According to the World Bank, 72 percent of the population live in absolute poverty. My own experience would put that number eighteen percent higher, but I don't know how they do their numbers and my statistics are only what I have collected with my own eyes. No one is worried that Madagascar will invade Europe, or South Korea, or The West Bank. In fact, during my ten-day visit to England, the only person who showed any interest in Madagascar whatsoever was Sir Ghilleen Prance, Director of the Royal Botanical Garden, Kew.

During a tour of the gardens, I asked Sir Ghilleen about genetic finger printing, on-site (*in situ*) conservation, and seed-bank (*ex situ*) conservation. In response to my questions he directed me toward a Mexican plant that had been in the botanical garden for over a hundred and fifty years and had just flowered for the first time. The point being, botanical gardens can conserve plants and seed banks may preserve the last remaining grains of an extinct species, but nothing can replace the environment from which it comes. Once an ecosystem is destroyed, seed bank or no seed bank, it is gone forever. Kew's ambitious project to store 10 percent of the world's seeds is in fact little more than a holding action against massive global ecological destruction. Self-pollination and micro-propagation can bring back only a few specimens of a single plant (that may or



may not flower in a human lifetime). Nothing can replace a 1000-year-old forest.

I emerged from the dream tunnel, still dazed by the speed of my evacuation from England, right into the pulsing heart of France. Paris, City of Light, seems to move a touch faster than old London town. The people speak faster, the drivers drive faster, insults are more frequent. Just watching the sculpted infrastructure go by is truly amazing: medieval flying buttresses, modern overpasses, elegant skyscrapers, covered bus stations, river piers. Antananarivo is still laying cobblestones to stop the mud from washing away the streets. Goats graze on grass growing in the potholes. Ox carts continue to block traffic in the center of town. Although the social welfare state in France has generated massive abuses, the government of Madagascar has done nothing whatsoever for its people. Thirty-five years after independence, fallen bridges have never been rebuilt, roadways are disintegrating, there is no public transportation system (except for Air Madagascar, which few peasants will ever fly).

At the Charles de Gaulle airport I wandered around the fashionable duty-free shops under the exposed-steel tube ceiling with several Malagasy passengers eager to return to their country. In general, the Malgash seem to respect the French for their ability to get things done, but find France a little too cold, the French a little too correct. Where is the warmth in a supermarket? There is no one to talk with, prices are fixed, and the fruits on display don't correspond to any particular season. The metro is fast but everyone is so silent. Where does the laughter go in a metro car?

We flew over Italy, the Mediterranean, and North Africa all through the night, and in the morning I awoke in the skies of Kenya to find the peak of Mount Kenya poking above the clouds like a lighthouse. The first three weeks of what has turned out to be my ten-year relationship with Africa were spent climbing Mount Kenya's hidden valleys, following elephant trails, dodging Cape Buffalo. Magic moments.

On the ground, in Nairobi, the Boeing 747 was surrounded by soldiers with automatic rifles and I was relieved by the fact that we were not allowed off the plane. On the trip out, I had spoken with a sullen airport vendor in Kiswahili and she had depressed me.

"How is Kenya," I asked.

"Not bad."

"How is President Moi?"

"He is a good man."

"You believe that?"

"What do you want me say?" She closed her mouth and looked right through me as if I did not exist and we had never spoken. Ahh, Kenya, Number One travel destination in East Africa.

Winging into Antananarivo, I was struck anew by the barren, treeless hills.

What would I see when I landed? In 1962 the country went wild with independence. The most popular song was "Now that we have it, we will never let it go." In 1972, the people danced in the streets to give power to the military. In 1975, socialism set the young afire. "The rich will need us now," said the poor. In 1991, strident militantism toppled the dictator and put a professor into the nation's top job. Every change of power in the last thirty years had been accompanied by wild energy. What would the people be doing now? I wondered. Singing? Getting Drunk? Feasting? Dancing? Talking? Protesting? What?

On the tarmac I passed the President's wife, Madame Ratsiraka, greeting several distinguished visitors from the French Government. It looked more like a family reunion than an official welcome.

"On the ground, in Nairobi, the Boeing 747 was surrounded by soldiers with automatic rifles and I was relieved by the fact that we were not allowed off the plane."

Nothing seemed especially different going through immigration, either, though I sensed was less monkey business. Passports were stamped quickly and perfunctorily, there was little foot dragging, and the officers did not seem so intent on spotting technicalities. It was Friday afternoon, the presidential inauguration

would be held Sunday morning.

As it turned out, the only big surprise of the day was that my wife and children had come to Antananarivo to greet me. They had suffered in the rain and heat, night and day, for the last ten days, and they were happy to combine a trip to the cool sun with a surprise for Papa. Without trees and vines to absorb the rainfall, the rivers now rise and fall precipitously in the North. The radio was reporting several villages unaccounted for and 500 people missing. My flight fatigue lifted miraculously when I saw my three-year-old son Rowland bouncing up and down and waving from the other side of the customs barrier. He looked so happy.

On Saturday we all went to visit the Tsimbazaza Zoological and Botanical Garden. It was an extremely pleasant outdoor park with tall shade trees, a palm grove, 17 species of lemur and ancient turtles, oblivious to it all, making love. The folks at Kew had told me about a wild-orchid program they were partnering with Tsimbazaza. Madagascar has over one thousand species of orchids, many of which are being stolen from the wild and shipped abroad without export licenses. To create a sustainable resource, a botanist at Kew came up with the

idea of cultivating a hundred of the most spectacular species and selling them legally. Small, practical ideas like these are the heart of sustainable development. I asked at the gate and in the office; no one had ever heard of the project.

In the afternoon we went to visit a crocodile farm. Big ugly crocs snapped up pieces of meat we threw at them from the safety of an elevated walkway. My sons were very impressed. So was I. The manager told me the farm was just a couple of years old but the owners had already paid back their entire bank loan. I asked about the security question, since the farm was a little outside Tana and didn't seem to have many neighbors.

"We were robbed twice by gangs with Kalashnikovs. They took our computers and everything of value. Now we have a concrete guard tower. At night we send two men up there with rifles and they're not allowed to come down until dawn. If there is any trouble they have authorization to kill."

Looking over the crocodiles, I suspected the guards wouldn't have too much problem disposing of the corpses either.

That night we changed to a better hotel, ordered room service, and went to sleep early. I received a message that an invitation to the inauguration was out of the question. Later I heard that journalists were required to be at the Presidential Palace at 6:30 a.m. for the 11:30 a.m. swearing-in ceremony. Their bags were thoroughly searched, cameras opened, pens unscrewed.

Nicolas, who is 18 months old, woke up very early on Sunday morning. Together we drank a bottle of warm milk, and then with Rowland, who woke up when he heard the noise, we went outside for a walk. The air was still cool and nothing seemed to move. For an hour or so we had the labyrinthine city to ourselves. There were no cars, no people, no dogs, no nothing. What I noticed most, in comparison to London, was the layer of greasy filth that covered every sidewalk, staircase and building. At about 6 a.m. groups of aggressive mendicants started to find us and I decided to return to the hotel.

Whenever I am in Antananarivo I hire the same taximan to drive me in from the airport. He is an ex-sergeant and very trustworthy. I wanted him to take us around on Sunday but he was already working. A month before a thief had stolen the back window of his Honda and it would cost him 4 million fmg (U.S.\$900) to replace it. For most Malgash this is more than they will earn in a lifetime. For Celestin it means he will have to sell most of his belongings, use up most of his savings, and work Sun-

days. This is why thieves are often killed in Tana. They ruin lives.

So, instead of going with Celestin, my family and I climbed into a creaking old taxi with a shifty driver to visit some riding horses near the Presidential palace. At 11:30 in the morning beggars were still the only people moving about the streets of the capital city. There were no cars, no buses, no parades, no loud bars, no earnest discussions, no music. There was silence.

Several miles from the Presidential palace, soldiers (pickets, in fact) were spread out along the road every hundred yards. They had their backs turned to the traffic and were carefully eyeing the rice paddies and small houses facing them. Their guns were oiled and loaded. What could they see that I could not?

When I first visited Madagascar, I had taken this same road out of Antananarivo in the same direction. Once the disease-ridden paddies and crumbling brick houses had appeared picturesque, intriguing; now they

appeared squalid, hopeless. On the radio I could hear Didier Ratsiraka giving his acceptance speech in French, a language he had once banned from schools and hardly anyone under the age of 35 understood anymore.

"Between France and Madagascar there has been colonization, political persecution, and the vicissitudes of history. But that is the past, and, as we must safeguard the common interests of both our countries, we must forget the past."

—President Didier Ratsiraka, Madagascar

President Ratsiraka thanked God for his victory while he formally inaugurated the Humanist and Ecological Republic. He asked for cooperation between France and Madagascar. He recalled that the United States had dropped two atomic bombs on Japan, but even so the two countries continued to trade profitably with each other.

"Between France and Madagascar there has been colonization, political persecution, and the vicissitudes of history. But that is the past, and, as we must safeguard the common interests of both our countries, we must forget the past."

There were no uplifting messages in the inaugural address, and I sensed the Malgash felt little. Under their previous President they had mistaken liberty for neglect, and now, like repentant sinners, they were preparing themselves to live under a stern patriarch who would tell them what to think. "We must forget the past"? My mind refused to believe my ears.

At this moment the decrepit taxi passed a vantage point where we could look across and see Ratsiraka's palace. My wife sat in the front seat with Rowland eating biscuits; I sat in the back seat with Nicolas as he pulled threads from the seat cover. It was impossible to roll

down the window because it was taped shut, but I managed to get a glimpse of the structure. It was a huge, rambling affair modeled after the Rova (the royal palace) but painted light blue. A certifiable white elephant.

This is when I asked myself the questions that had been bothering me ever since I returned from London — Is Madagascar a failed society? A society with a thousand-year history of decline, a society that has refused to embrace the idea of a single God, that has never created a single technological achievement? A society so far out of touch with the developed world that it may never, ever catch up? A society that is still pre-industrial in a world order dominated by service economies? What is it about Madagascar that doesn't work?

Intellectually, I find it easy to detest Madagascar for its obvious failings, and the speed of jet travel makes the poverty and ignorance even more stark and dramatic to new eyes. Back in Diego, however, I was happy to land in the stiff heat. A taxi driver who knows me took our baggage checks and fought with the other passengers while Rowland and Nicolas ran around the one-room airport screaming. My boys, blond-haired Martians, are well known in

the region, and they had a difficult time dodging all the hugs and pinches.

"How's Diego?" I ask the driver on the road to town.

"Never been better."

"No riots?"

"We are little stones, the Admiral is a big rock. Why throw little stones at a big rock?"

"No problems then?"

"In Diego, my brother, we never have any problems."

The warm air blew sweetly through my hair and I could smell the sea across the fields. I thought of the red lechis I would soon pick from the trees, the taste of grilled fish covered with green mangos, and the prospect of sleeping in my own bed near my own wife and children. I was coming home. I was invaded with the thrill of being alive, and I found it hard to deny, somewhere deep in the bone, an irrational sense of hope for the future of this odd place. □

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]

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 devel-

oping-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]

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 un-availing 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]

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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