

# 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.*

## St. Valentine's Day Diego Suarez, 1997

ANTISANANA, Madagascar

March 1, 1997

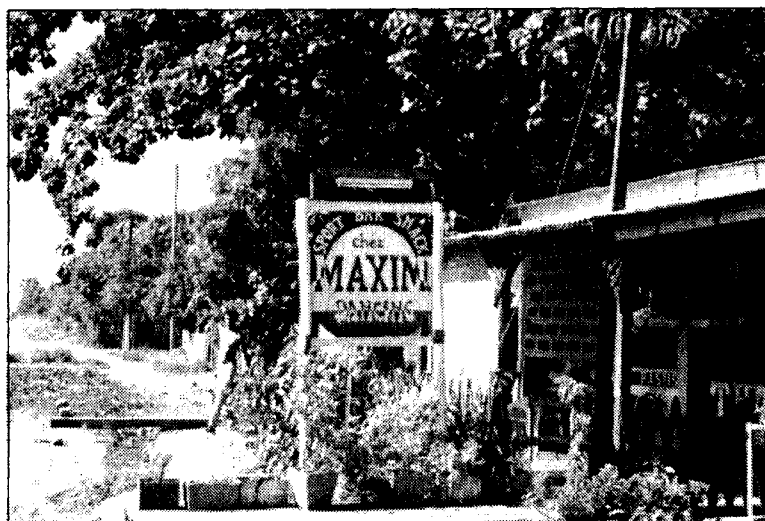
By John B. Robinson

My wife and I went to out to dinner on Saint Valentine's Day. The restaurant, nominally the best in town, blared French love songs and served a fixed menu that was inedible. A few Indian couples line-danced a cha-cha, a Colombian sang karaoke in Spanish, and there were even some tourists who didn't know where else to go.

After the event we drove out to Maxim's, a dance shack on the edge of town. On the way, a nymph beckoned to us from the side of the road while rolling her waist in a graphic manner. Diego has a reputation for beautiful girls and easy sex, both true.

I parked the Land Rover on top of a greasy mud puddle and we walked through a crowd of young men standing in the rain looking forlorn. Although the men have all the cultural power in Diego Suarez, it is the women who have the money; at Maxim's, as at other discos, there is a steep cover charge (5,000 fmg, or \$1). The young men were waiting for their best girls to come out and buy their way in. When we left a few hours later, most of the boys were still standing there, soaked through, bored, hangdog.

Delphine and I began to gyrate to the music of the Seven Mercenaries — a pitched staccato that seemed to vibrate off the walls and make our hips boogie before we knew what they were doing. As we bumped and pumped our way onto the dance floor, Delphine gyrated like a Persian belly dancer while I did an imitation of Bobby Brown, Best In Town. There were no individuals to be found out there; only one great pulsating mass of flesh. Women sandwiching men, men thrusting against women, everybody doing a vertical imitation of a horizontal



Chez Maxim



*The Nouvel Hotel*

sport. Smiles of pleasure mixed with the heated odor of sweat and liberated happiness.

Besides Maxim's, there are three hot spots in Diego, each with a particular flavor. *The Nouvel Hotel* is where sailors end up. There is a tremendous 80-foot-long bar where every visitor to the region has sat at one time or another. The regulars, a revolving crowd of scantily clad supple adolescents, are referred to as *Pychonettes*, after the name of the owner, Monsieur Pychon. *Le Vahinée* (The Visitor), is an outdoor cafe for residents and hard-core prostitutes; downstairs is a disco most folks try to ignore. And of course, there is the *Tropical*. This successful night club has managed to capture most of the limited market share by sponsoring contests for the best legs, biggest buttocks, etc. The owners are two French promoters who used to create media events on the *cote d'azur*.

Visitors, Malagasy or foreign, are generally astonished by the open sexuality of the North. To understand the mores it is imperative to understand two culturally accepted precepts.

1) Sex and Marriage are entirely separate notions. Fidelity, as a moral principle, does not exist. A husband sees nothing in having several mistresses, nor do the wives have a problem sleeping with new men. When the boats come in, wives and daughters rush the discos to snare a *vazaha* (stranger), and there by contribute some money to the household income. In this region, single male strangers who stay overnight in a village are expected to have intercourse with a woman chosen by the village. If the elders are unable to select the right person, the women will organize and present themselves so as not to dishonor their collective femininity. In town, professional sex workers are called upon to accompany visiting dignitaries, and even if the man is abusive and rude, the girls will stay in the hotel room until morning so as not to lose their reputation.

2) A man is obliged to give a *cadeau* (gift) to a woman

every time they have intercourse. This *cadeau* can be a flower, a beer, a toothbrush, a banana, or money. Hence, expecting a *cadeau* from your husband or lover for sex and accepting money after sex with a stranger, is the same thing. That is why Northerners will often tell incredulous strangers, in the midst of a seething mass of uninhibited females, that there are only a handful of prostitutes in Diego Suarez.

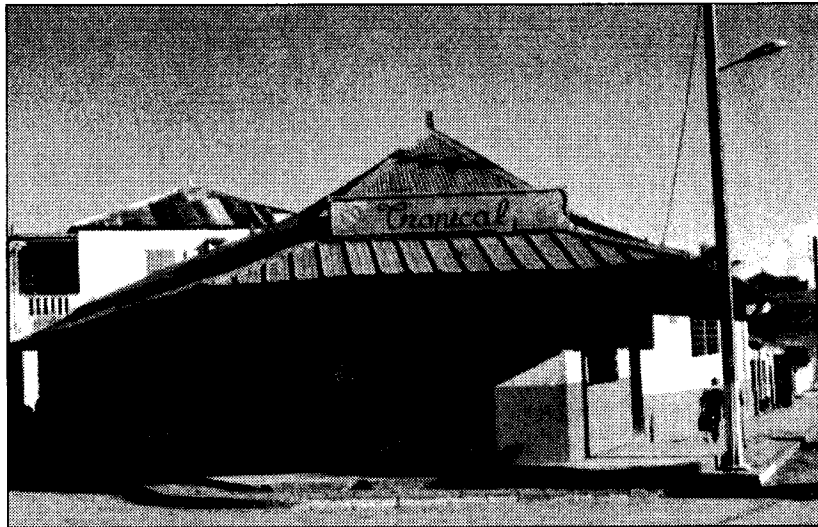
International sexual mores are a complicated subject in Madagascar and politicians often accuse foreigners of making prostitutes of their nation's daughters. While it is true that some men, especially fifty-year-old Mediterranean types, do specifically come here to sleep with young girls (and boys), they are more abusing a moral system already

in place than creating a whole new way of life. If there is anything to blame for the childhood sex trade, it is the extreme poverty of the country, which has been sold down the river by successive generations of corrupt leaders. If the politicians did not line their pockets with development money, the girls would not need to seek sex to pay their school fees.

In 1996, one cannot talk about sex without talking about AIDS. In the North, according to a leading pathologist, there were two cases in 1990, none in 1992 or 1993, four cases in 1994, and 17 cases in 1995. My source (who wished to remain anonymous) claimed that for every case registered, there are 1000 HIV positive carriers. He told me that statistics in Diego, renowned as a sexport among mariners the world over, would change dramatically in the next five



*le Vahinée*



*The Tropical*

years. As part of his job he hands out condoms and counsels safe sex. The girls throw the condoms in the trash bucket. "The men don't like them," they say. He realizes that educating men is the other solution, but the men don't listen either.

"At what point will they start to listen?" I ask.

"Once they see their friends dying."

Because Maxim's is well away from the port, foreigners rarely show up, and on Saint Valentine's Day, the dancing got hot, hot, hot. Some songs called for responsive shouts, others for mini chorus lines, still more for that famous Diego hip wiggle. Girls and guys, forty-year-old bureaucrats and their lovelies, the sons and daughters of every Nabob and Colonel, all were at Maxim's to move it. Delphine and I, believe you me, danced with the best of them as if the thump would never end. □



# 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 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 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]

**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]

**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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