

# 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.*

## Among the Pagans 10,000 Miles From Home

**ANTISANANA, Madagascar**

April 1, 1997

By John B. Robinson

On Easter Sunday I sat with my parents and my son in a large Episcopal cathedral in Cape Town, South Africa. There was a minister in full regalia, a choir robed in white, a gold cross, a raft of lighted candles, flowers, prayer and song. The spicy smell of incense perfumed the sea air. These religious symbols were familiar to me. The service was even conducted in English, a great relief after eight months of navigating the shoals of French, Malagasy and Kiswahili.

The preacher spoke about apartheid, and how, instead of forgetting the horrors of the past, it was best to remember them. He related an incident involving his widowed aunt. Upon visiting the grave of her dead husband, she discovered the body and gravestone missing. After a few heart-wrenching days, she learned that he had been marked "coloured" on his death certificate and his body removed to another section of the racially segregated burial ground.

**"For the Malagasy Government, which is incapable of insuring any basic services at all to 75 percent of the population, international aid is the only way to ward off total anarchy."**

"We lived through these times," said the preacher. "However fantastic they might appear, they happened. To deny their existence is deny a part of life. As Christians, we must try to understand our past."

His words sent my mind flying back to Madagascar. A mendicant nation. A nation which

cannot feed its own people, educate its own elite, shoe its own soldiers, build its own factories, decide on its own language or remove its own pestilent garbage from its own decaying streets. Americans would be shocked if the French drew up plans for the re-organization of their school system, the Japanese overhauled their hospitals, the Indonesians trained their soldiers, charities sent garbage trucks to remove refuse from their streets. For the Malagasy Government, that is incapable of insuring any basic services at all to 75 percent of the population, international aid is the only way to ward off total anarchy. Madagascar is a nation that, like it's former role-model North Korea, has utterly and completely failed. Current hope for the future rests on President Ratsiraka's slogan, "We must forget the past." So I asked myself, on Easter Sunday, a day that reminds Christians of a human crucifixion 2000 years ago, even if it is possible to forget the past, is it a good idea?

Upon my return from South Africa I was invited to a very different type of religious ceremony. A pagan ceremony. One so old and filled with so many bizarre rituals that it, or a ceremony of its type, pre-dated the coming of Christ and the impact of Christianity on the western world. In short, I was invited to a sacrifice.

The ceremony took place on the edge of a sacred lake called Antanavo. In

Madagascar, the word "sacred" means divine, touched by the divine or a manifestation of the divine. There are sacred animals, rocks, caves, trees, lakes and mountains everywhere. This means that they are holy, in the sense that the divine deity, or an ancestor, has at one time or another manifested its power through these objects.

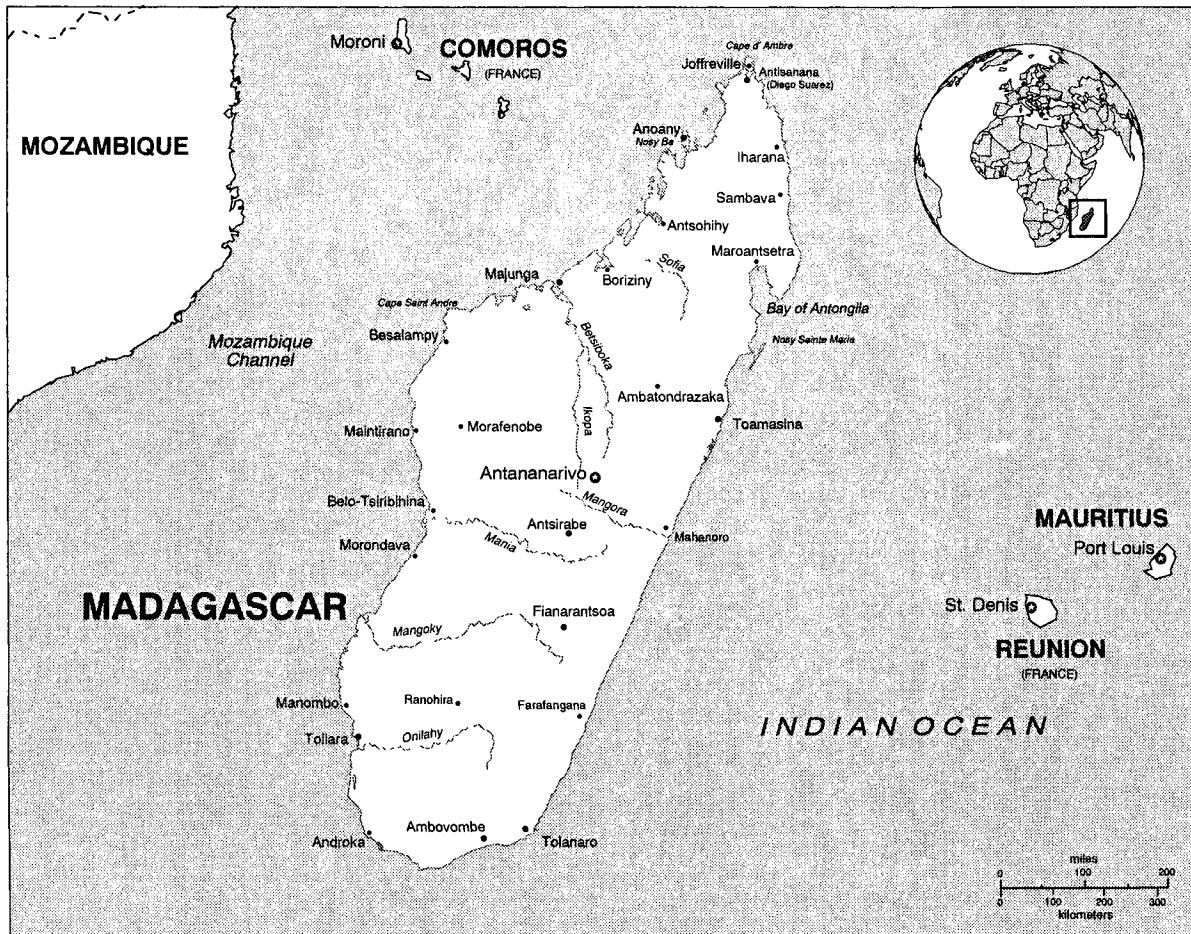
According to legend, the lake is the result of a curse. It is said that an old woman came to a village asking for water to drink. She was turned away at the first house, and every other house except for the last. In this hut, filled with young children, she was given comfort and a large cup of water. When she had satisfied her thirst, she called divine retribution down upon the villagers. "Since water is so precious in this village," she is supposed to have declared, "I will send you more of it than you have ever seen." It started to rain and all the villagers except her hosts, who lived to tell the story, were eventually drowned as a lake formed on top of the village.

Many big crocodiles now live in lake Antanavo. It is believed that the crocodiles are the spirits of ancient nobles. One proof is that some of the crocodiles have been seen wearing bracelets around their forearms. My suggestion that these bands may have been the result of a scientific research project was met with general scorn. Hence the lake, as a manifestation of divine retribution,

and the crocodiles, reincarnations of long dead ancestors, are both considered Holy. Nearby inhabitants do not bathe or wash their clothes in lake water or drink from the lake. This is not entirely true, because the lake serves as a reservoir for a nearby town, but folks generally ignore this fact.

In the simplest of terms, a sacrifice at the sacred lake means killing a zebu, symbol of earthly wealth and power, and feeding its flesh to the crocodiles. The entire ceremony must be paid for by the person seeking to receive ancestral benediction. As a typical zebu costs about one million fmg, and the salary for an average worker is 160,000 fmg a month, the cost of a sacrifice is a major life-time event.

My family (Delphine, Rowland, Nicolas) and I arrived precisely at 8 a.m., the designated hour. This was no small feat, considering the condition of the route. Once off the main road all development stops. Only ox cart traces lead into the bush. There is no electricity or running water; there is no modern health care. People live about like they did many centuries ago. Except for the purchase of plastic plates, knife blades, and factory-made cloth, there is no need for money. Wealth, spiritual and societal, is determined by the number of children produced and zebu owned. I know



a factory manager who refers to the Malgash as the last survivors of the stone age.

Presiding over the sacrifice were a bunch of old men and middle-aged apprentices. They were dressed in rags and one of them appeared to be wearing a Muslim prayer cap. According to one informant, they all held very noble positions in the court hierarchy that owed allegiance to the King of Amilobe.

Soon after we arrived, a big crocodile surfaced to watch one of the old men cut a clearing in the tall grass. When he was finished a sleek brown bull was tied to a tree in sight of the crocodile. Each of the crocodiles has a local name, like "he who thrashes a lot," and this particular reptile was bold enough to actually climb out on the bank, an extremely propitious sign. In the course of a usual sacrifice a traditional caller must coax the crocodiles into sight. The crocodiles have a notoriously fickle reputation. Last year a group of Japanese tourists purchased a zebu in order to film its demise and catch the crocodiles on video tape, but the crocodiles stayed away despite all entreaties. The locals claimed the Japanese came with the wrong intentions.

After an hour of swatting mosquitoes in the hot sun, the hosts of the ceremony roared into the clearing like stylish city people, standing on the bed of a battered, mud-spattered pickup truck. One old man said, "Diego!" meaning the town, and all the countryside peasants laughed. At this point there must have been a hundred spectators surrounding the condemned zebu, the old men and the crocodiles.

The zebu's feet were quickly bound together and the beast was manhandled into a lying position. A five-liter container of white rum made the rounds. Rum, a divine spirit, is a crucial element in the ceremony. Without rum, the Malgash believe it is impossible to "change states" and communicate with the ancestors. Without rum, there would be a "silence," a "void."

A boy poured water over the inert zebu, then a woman with two living parents stepped forward and walloped the defenseless beast with her fist. She lectured the animal that it was only a zebu, but even so, when it died it would be replaced by another zebu. Its death was in the natural scheme of life.

The ceremony itself, I was told, was an attempt to balance the past with the future, the known with the unknown, the living with the dead. The sacrifice of a living animal was an acknowledgment that one day we will all die and then we will have to "live" with our ancestors.

The ceremony was an attempt to create a "whole," a harmonious world order.

Another old man, more ancient than the first, then held the zebu's tail and spoke to it at length. After he was finished our host, a forty-year-old woman, joined hold of the tail and communicated with the ancestors as well. She was here to repay a promise she had made years ago. Back then she had asked the ancestors for help because she had many diplomas and no future. She and her mother slept together on the dirt floor of her cousin's house. They had nothing. A month after she made her plea she won a scholarship to study in France. Things had only got better and she had bought a house for her mother, a car for herself and had given European medicine to her village. She was slaughtering the zebu to thank the ancestors and repay a "celestial" debt.

A group of apprentices forced the zebu's head into a fixed position and a third old man stepped forward and cut the zebu's throat in a slow precise manner. As the blood gushed out of the animal's neck, the gentleman holding the zebu's tail hobbled around the animal and caught some of its warm blood on a white plate containing a paper bank note and an old silver coin. The bank note and the blood would be offered to a nearby totem pole topped by a zebu's horns. The silver coin would become a closely guarded family heirloom.

"As the blood gushed out of the animal's neck, the gentleman holding the zebu's tail hobbled his way around the animal and caught some of its warm blood on a white plate containing a paper bank note and an old silver coin."

In the north, silver is a special metal because it was once worn as bracelets by the nobles. Their name in malagasy is *zafin'ny fotsy* — "grandchildren of the white silver." Therefore *volafotsy* — "silver metal," has sacred properties.

The blessed silver coin has a special place in northern malagasy society. If a person touches something "dirty" — steps in an open sewer, for example — he or she needs to bathe with water touched by the silver coin to "wipe away the dirtiness." The coin is also used to correct "celestial" faults. For example, if a man sleeps with his best friend's daughter, creating a breach in their relationship, he must perform not only several community acts as recompense, but he must also wash with a bucket of water containing the blessed silver coin "to wipe away his bad acts." A more serious offense may call for the sacrifice of a zebu to "appease the ancestors."

At the societal level, the presence of the silver coin reveals the existence of a secondary structure of government, that is to say traditional kings, healers and headmen. While Madagascar is a nominally Christian nation, ruled by an elected government, the reality of the situation is that the elected government has little direct impact on the day-to-day lives of the majority of its people. In Madagascar, moral authority rests with the traditional

rulers. If one accepts the old cliché that power accumulates in direct proportion to its non-use, then traditional rulers are very strong indeed. They either bless, or decline to bless, projects proposed to them, rarely sticking out their necks to create a solution.

Just before Ratsiraka's first presidency imploded, he tried to create "Federalism," a political movement to put power in the hands of traditional leaders while retaining the presidency. The movement failed and when President Zafy was inaugurated he threw many of these "agitators" in prison. With Ratsiraka's reincarnation, some of the Federalists have become ministers, but Federalism as a movement no longer serves a political purpose.

One of the reasons Madagascar has self-destructed for the last 25 years is that the elected government and the traditional rulers have been fighting each other tooth and nail. The communist tactic of crushing religious practices and ignoring traditional authority resulted in the complete collapse of all initiative. Instead of imposing their will from Antananarivo, nationally appointed bureaucrats need to ask the blessing of traditional leaders. Yet due to differences in religion (Christian versus pagan) and tribe, they refuse. In many ways it is the age-old story of the *haut plateau* versus *cotiers*.

The pagan symbolism of the silver coin is rife with Christian irony. Although Christ threw the money changers from the steps of the temple, nobody in Madagascar has figured out how to deal with Indo-Pakistani and Chinese merchants. As a class they control about 85 percent of the cash economy. The merchants are contemptuous of both the elected government and the traditional rulers. As a result, economic backing for social projects is rarely forthcoming.

My invitation to the sacrifice was also rife with symbolism. For although foreigners are mistrusted, misunderstood and generally scorned, at the present moment in Malagasy history they are the only people capable of bridging the internal rifts in Malagasy society. Successful international organizations typically

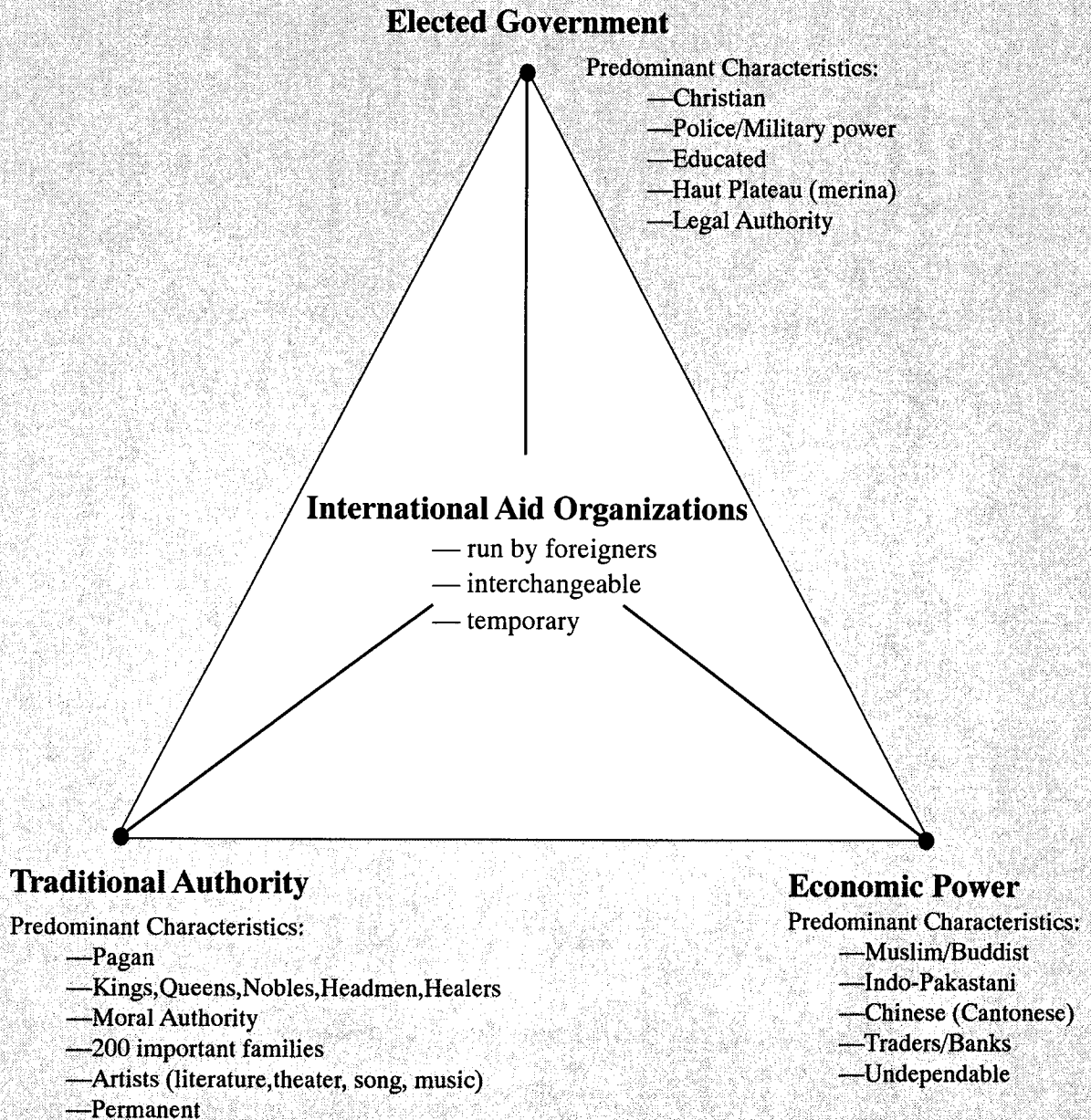
negotiate with the elected government, traditional leaders and the merchants (often represented by local banks) all at the same time. Those that fail to accomplish their mission (USAID's environmental conservation project in the early 1990's is a prime example) often neglect one of the three parties. For although each power group has the possibility of blocking the others, all three have to be in agreement before anything major can be accomplished. [See appendix A]

When the blood had stopped spewing into the air and the zebu finally died amid a few last convulsions, hunks of its carcass were sliced off and thrown to the waiting crocodiles. People began to sing, clap their hand, and dance — anything to encourage the crocodiles to approach. One of the old men explained that "the crocodiles come to us, we do not seek the crocodile. [This is] proof that these crocodiles contain the spirits of men." A highlight of the blood bath was an enormous crocodile that swallowed an entire leg without chewing — hoof, thigh bone and all.

The hostess of the proceedings came over to me and encouraged me to ask a favor from the crocodiles, the reincarnated spirits of long dead nobles. So, standing there, staring at pre-historic reptiles swallowing a sacrificed ox, I thought of a wish. I thought of the only thing that could possibly reconcile all my negative feelings towards Madagascar with my positive feelings. I thought of my well-educated past in comfortable surroundings and the present circumstances that had led me to participate in a pagan ritual 10,000 miles from home. I held my eighteen-month-old son up so he could see the crocodiles and I asked for something I really needed. I asked for understanding.

Immediately after I made my wish it began to rain. According to the pagans this was an auspicious sign, so my family and I decided to leave on a good note. Fourteen old women, young girls and newborn babies crammed into my midget Land Rover and together we slithered and bounced out through the mud until we reached the paved road and the modern catastrophe beyond. □

## Appendix A: Triangular Power Structure of Malagasy Society







## 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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