

# 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.

## Pousse-Pousse Poetry

ANTISANANA, Madagascar

May 15, 1997

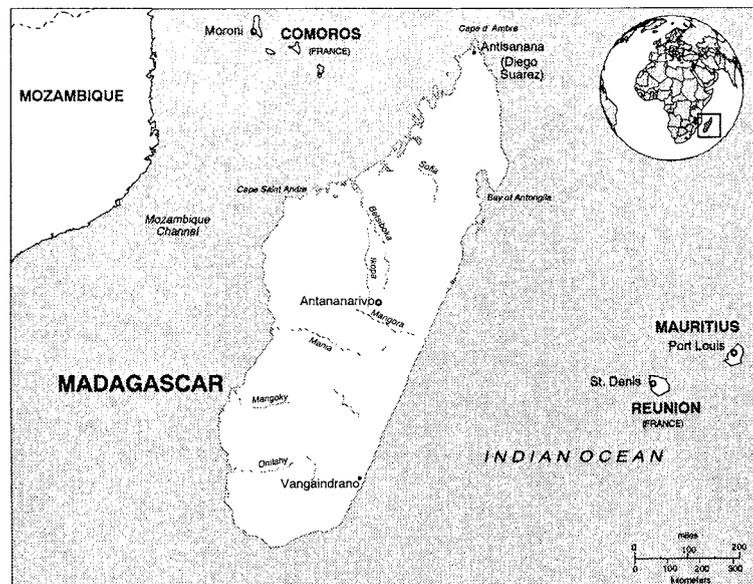
By John B. Robinson

The *pousse-pousse* is a Malagasy rickshaw and a permanent feature of every large town in Madagascar. The men who pull them are all Antesaka, a tribe from the southeast whose tribal capital is called Vangaindrano — “the place where one buys water.”

Among the 18 tribes, the Antesaka are the equivalent of India’s “untouchables.” they are despised for the filth in which they live and the base nature of their work. In late January cyclone Grettelle swept though Vangaindrano, destroying many thousands of hectares of paddies. The already scattered Antesaka have since become even more dispersed over the island as they search for work and send as much money as possible home to their families. There are many reports of starvation.

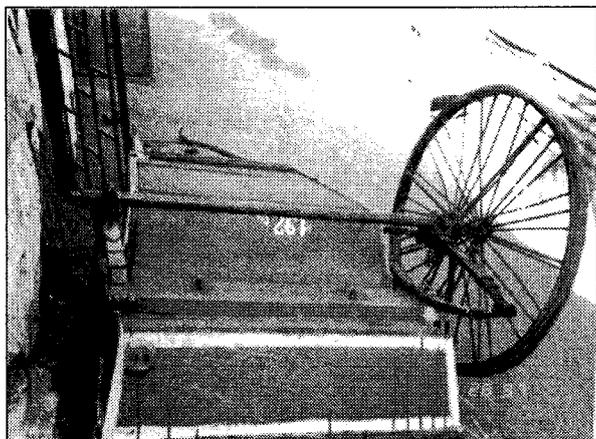
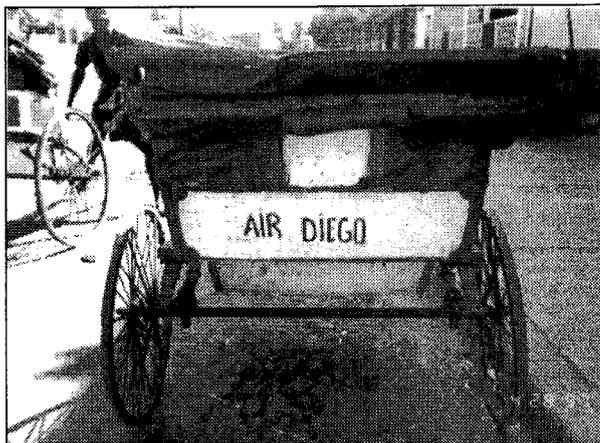
Despite their position in Malagasy society and their utter poverty, there is one thing that cannot be denied — they are universally cheerful. To probe the question of happiness in poverty, I spent several days with the *pousse-pousse* pullers of Diego Suarez. I discovered two things: 1) The Antesaka consider “life on earth” only temporary passage before they join the ancestors and “live” in peace and repose. They do not consider that what they eat or where they sleep has any importance whatsoever. 2) The *pousse-pousse* pullers work under a mountain of debt. If a parent dies they must buy an expensive *lamba* (death shroud) and sacrifice a zebu, so that the departed will “live well” among the ancestors. The price of the zebu and the *lamba* must usually be borrowed. Because of unsurious loan rates the debt load doubles every six months, until everything has been taken or the money raised. But the Antesaka are not exploited by Indian merchants or by members of another tribe; it is their own nobles and their own king who force them into permanent indebtedness.

As I found no way to describe the joy of the Antesaka in prose, I have attempted to capture a grain of their existence in photos and poetry.



## Air Diego

Light when heavy, heavy when light.  
The days pass no more significant than a breath of air.  
Empty my *pousse* has no value,  
My ancestors no *lamba*,  
Myself no sepulcher,  
My sons no rice.  
A truck has no soul  
No wives or parents  
No departed to appease or consult.  
Fill me up,  
I will pull until my head is light.



## 12 Sacks of Rice

Twelve sacks of rice were too heavy for my *pousse*,  
But not my fine heart, my worn hands, my great will.  
Pile on another sack and pull it I will.  
And another on top of that — can you hear me?  
I am not afraid to sweat, to tug, to fall ill.  
A zebu I must pay.  
My wife has seven brothers and all have paid except I.  
Another sack I beg you.  
I am not afraid to prove myself a man,  
My wife must not lower her head at the village well,  
A zebu I must pay.

## Dignity

Is it your dignity that feels wounded?  
Your prudish delicacy that prevents you from calling on  
my arms, my legs, my back?  
You are not so grand!  
The other day I carried boards for the sawmill worth  
twice your pride.  
Come now!  
Climb aboard my *pousse*!  
Your feet must be tired, let mine carry their load.



## Lunch Time

This stomach knows no decency.  
I can not shame it for the demands it makes.  
It wants beef, shrimp, cassava, and good green things.  
You will have only rice tonight, horrid thing.  
For your cause I never save enough,  
For your insistent pleadings I am marooned  
In this strangers' town far from my own.



### Cooking Fire

The taste of wood smoke has no price.  
 Foreigners and Hovas, eating in their rush, firing their  
     reposts over cutting torches,  
 What do you know of a King's palate?  
 Keep your *foie gras* and gray wine  
 Keep your soft chairs and leather shoes.  
 Life enters through the mouth and sorts from the womb  
 Fine ashes mingle with saliva  
 And I will spill a tribute to ones gone ahead  
 A remembrance of life past.

### Life

Though my rags be filthy and my house made of  
     palm branches  
 My tombeau will be made of stone.  
 I will live then.  
 When this comedy of a thousand insults is over, my  
     debts repaid.  
 Move over Father  
 To take my place is all I ask.  
 O Ancestors hear me now,  
 I labor for your rest — have no pity,  
 I ask none.



### Papa Pousse-Eh!

He guides me when the path is dark  
 Lets me run ahead when I see clearly.  
 He guards my money  
 And I his confidence.  
 Aye Papa Rosy, I sing of thee.  
 They will know your worth a long distance hence  
 Though you die an internal exile.  
*Pousse-Pousse-Eh!*

### Palm Wine, Our Place, Tonight

Tonight it will be cat piss and  
 The serene smile of my favorite lady.  
 No Gin Rummy,  
 No exhausted slouch in the room with eighty others.  
 Tonight there will be love behind the market stalls  
 Rum *à gogo*,  
 Dancing in the mud dust alley,  
 A moment to breathe like men.  
 Come let us smell of cat piss, all of us,  
 Let us stink together in our joy.



# 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]

**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]

**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-SAHARAN AFRICA]

**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-SAHARAN AFRICA]

**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-SAHARAN AFRICA]

**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-SAHARAN AFRICA]

Chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise, Institute Fellows are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.

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