

# ICWA LETTERS

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## *Isicathamiya:* 'To Tread Like a Cat'

BY SHARON F. GRIFFIN

DURBAN, South Africa

July 1995

At 2 A.M. on a Sunday, I rise from my bed, dress quickly, gulp a glass of orange juice and head to the YMCA on gritty Beatrice Street in central Durban. Standing outside the building and in its foyer are men, dozens of them clumped together in groups. I wade through the masses and climb two flights of stairs to a room filled with 150 or so people, both men and women — all black South Africans — seated on metal folding chairs. The room's hardwood floors are unfinished, and in one corner is a hole big enough to swallow the foot of a man wearing a size 13 shoe. Scribbled on a blackboard in the front of the room are math equations and the message, "please Lord, help me to hold on."

I walk toward the front, trailing four friends, and we settle into chairs that we'll occupy for the next five hours. In an aisle to our right, eight men line up. They walk single file to the front of the room, exaggerating ever so slightly the natural swing of their arms and the bend in their knees. There in front, they spread themselves into a semi-circle.

I sit straight up in my chair, and prepare to listen as the weekly all-night *isicathamiya* competition begins. *Isicathamiya* is a term used to describe a polished style of close harmony singing developed in the 1920s and '30s among Zulu male migrant workers in the coal mining districts of Dundee, Vyrheid and Newcastle in the Natal Midlands. This male vocal tradition incorporates a mixture of African-American jubilee styles, black-face minstrelsy, ragtime, Zulu traditional wedding songs and country music. The word "*isicathamiya*" is Zulu for "to walk like a cat," and refers to the slow, carefully choreographed steps and tap dance movements that accompany the singing. Some might recall that this musical style reached the top of international pop charts as a result of Paul Simon's Grammy Award-winning album, "Graceland," which featured the Durban-based *isicathamiya* choir, Ladysmith Black Mambazo.

When I first learned of the competition, I was excited to go—that is, until I found out that it starts late on a Saturday night and ends the following morning. In the not-so-long-ago days of apartheid, curfew laws prohibited blacks from being on Durban's city streets after 10 P.M., and they were expected to remain off the streets until morning. That's why, historically, the competition has been held in the middle of the night. (Just as an aside, the security guard at my former St. Regis flat used to get upset whenever a black person arrived at 10 P.M. or after. I mention this to let you know that people's attitudes have not necessarily kept pace with political changes here.) The evening is broken up into two parts: the first part starts

Sharon F. Griffin is an ICWA fellow studying the language, culture and politics of the Zulu people. of KwaZulu-Natal.

between 9:30 and 10 P.M. and is called the *iprakhtisa*, "the practice." The second part is the *imusic* (music) or *khompiti* (competition), which generally begins sometime after 2 A.M. We arrived at the tail-end of the practice.

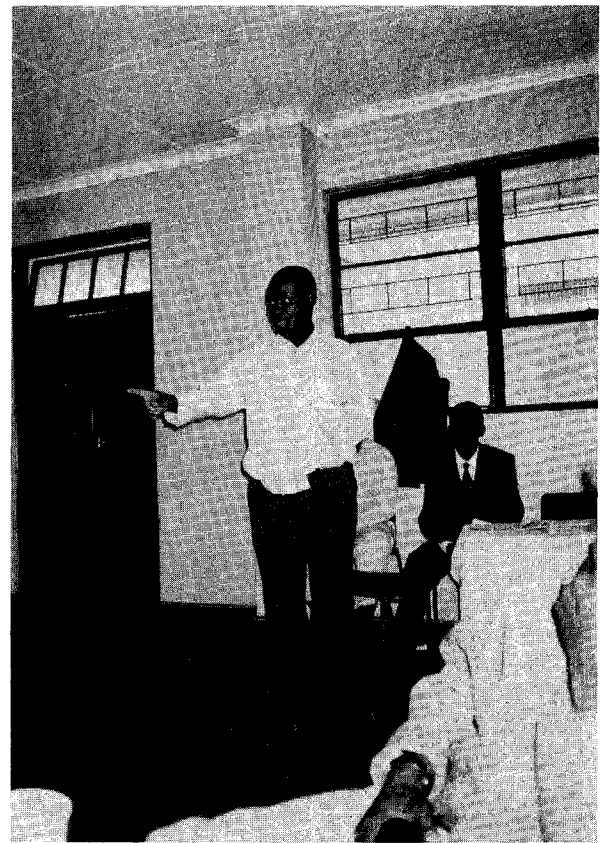
During the practice, the men wear normal street clothes, and members of the audience are allowed to whistle and clap. During the actual competition, however, the men dress immaculately, in elegant and, more often than not, tailored outfits. And the audience must remain quiet, so as not to influence the judging. Judging is serious business. When a judge needs to go to the restroom, a representative from each participating group is summoned to go with him or her. That's done to prevent some unscrupulous character from trying to influence or bribe the judge while he or she is seeking relief in the toilet. The two times I've been to a competition the judges have been black men. However, I've been told that for many years only whites were asked to judge. Performers preferred whites as judges because they supposedly had no ties — personal or otherwise — to the performers.

While performers practice, their girlfriends, wives and women supporters often join them on stage. The women are sort of like cheerleaders. Most of the time they stand on either side of the performers, rehearsing along with the male vocalists. It's not unusual to see one of them walk up to a performer to hand him a change purse, pocketbook, money or some other personal item as a token of encouragement. My first time going to a competition I walked in during a practice session and one of the first things I noticed was a tall lanky man, bent slightly at the knees, clutching a small pocketbook. Each group that followed had at least one man carrying a pocketbook. I wondered if maybe I had stumbled onto a new fad until *isicathamiya* veteran Paulos Msimanga cleared things up.

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Paulos Msimanga is a founding member of the South African Traditional Music Association and a fixture at the YMCA Saturday competition. He said *isicathamiya* is closely linked to traditional Zulu wedding songs and *ingoma* dance. *Ingoma* dance is a collective term for a variety of "virile" dance styles which originated among farm laborers in the Natal midlands during the 1920s. Generally, *ingoma* dancers throw their legs up high and stamp the feet down hard. *Isicathamiya*, on the other hand, requires its performers to "step softly and not too high," he said. The knees bend only slightly, and the legs kick gently. The hallmark of *isicathamiya* is grace — subtle, almost silent footwork. "In the urban areas, where the whites live, the men had to learn to step softly, keep quiet, tread like a cat," Mr. Msimanga said. "You can never hear the sound of a cat."

*Isicathamiya* is what you might describe as a cross-

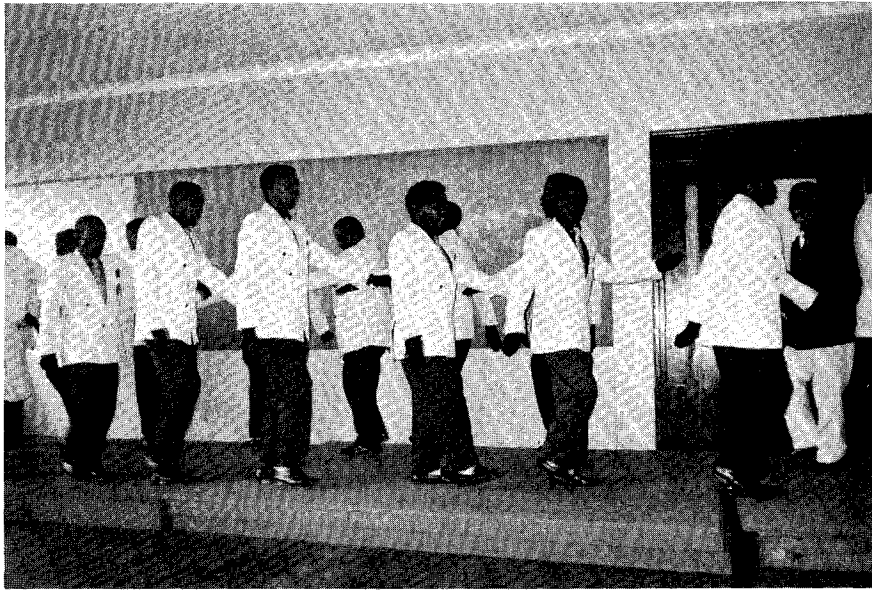


Mr. Msimanga

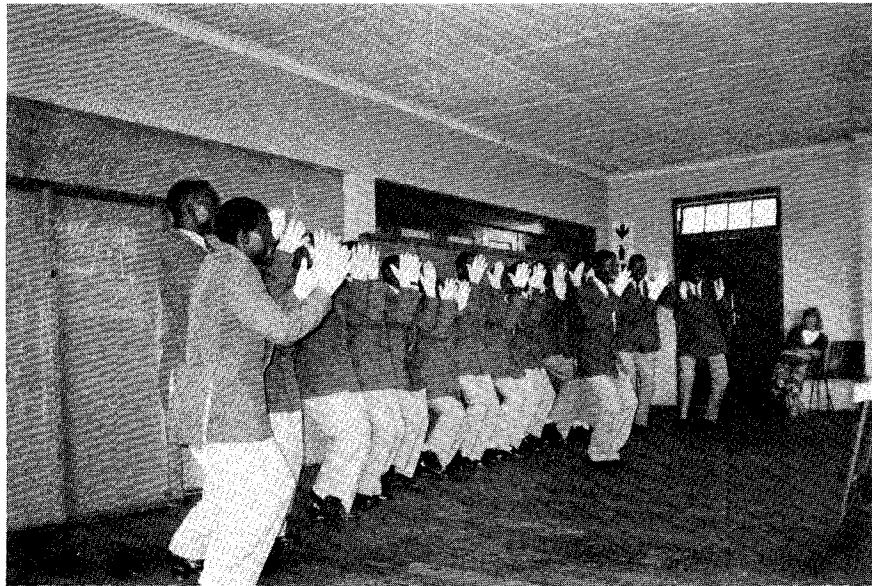
fertilization of urban and rural traditions and styles. "The men came from the rural areas to the hostels with nothing to do for recreation," Mr. Msimanga said. "So they began singing. They take songs from home and change them...twist them. They must never be the same (as songs that originate in the rural areas.) They take back the new songs to the rural areas."

German scholar Veit Erlmann, author of "African Stars: Studies in Black South African Performance," wrote that the "pre-history" of *isicathamiya* reaches back to 1890, when American minstrel shows were all the rage in South Africa's urban centers. No one character left a deeper impression on the minds of South Africans than Orpheus Myron McAdoo, an African-American born to slave parents in 1858 in Greensboro, NC. His Virginia Jubilee Singers spent almost five years in South Africa between 1890 and 1898. "McAdoo's visits became so deeply ingrained in popular consciousness as a turning point in black South Africa's musical history that Thembinko Phewa, member of the legendary *Evening Birds*, declared: 'Our oldest brothers, the first to sing *isicathamiya*, were the Jubilee Brothers. That was 1891.'" (Erlmann: 159)

There have been other, equally important, influences on the music, dance and dress of performers. Researchers have found that film shows organized by missionaries left impressions on performers, particularly films by Fred Astaire, which highlighted polished tap dancing. One of the most significant changes in the history of the choral music occurred around



*Paulos Msimanga says one significant feature of isicathamiya is that lyrics are not written down. Instead, lyrics are passed orally from one generation to the next.*



1938. The change involved the introduction of uniform dress, and credit is attributed to Solomon Linda and his *Evening Birds*, a group that met its demise in the 1940s. The same Thembinko Phewa said of Linda: "He was a nice chap. Nice and clean, too. He always wore white shoes or black and white shoes; black suit, that man. That was their uniform, the only uniform — black suits with white stripes. They were the first

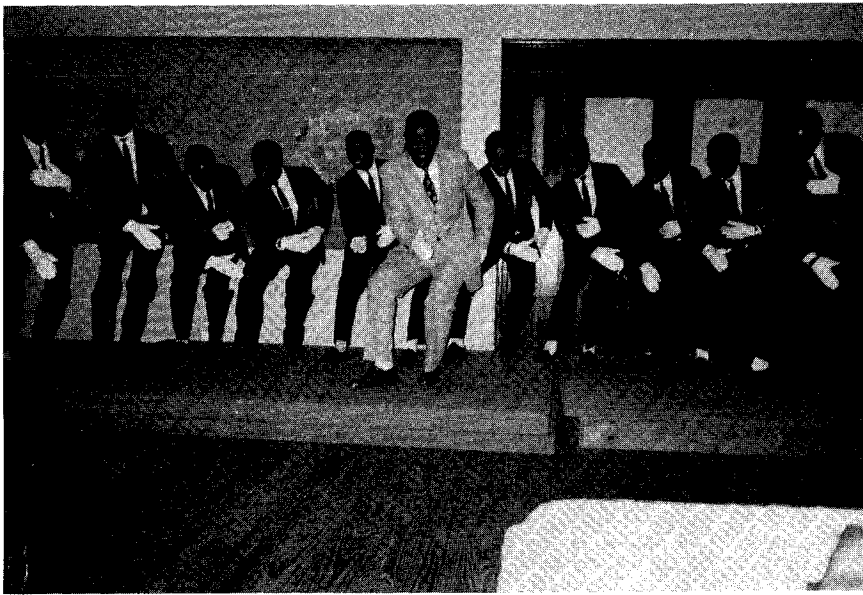
important fields of American missionary activity. A significant number of performers belong to the independent Zionist Church.

The performances also remind me of "step show" competitions. Such competitions are held on American college campuses among African-American fraternities and sororities. Sorority competes against so-

group that introduced uniforms in 1938."<sup>1</sup> Another recent and significant change occurred when groups began including women singers. While most choral groups still remain all-male, I've seen at least four with a woman singer and the women are always dressed as impeccably as the men.

The performers have perfectly blended, resonant voices, that linger in the mind hours after a performance. Their astonishing diversity of styles makes it difficult to immediately associate the genre with a single musical form. I've never seen a live minstrel show — only ones on television — and memories of those performances are vague. However, I associate the white gloves worn by performers with minstrel shows. The *a cappella* music and smooth steps remind me of the velvety sounds of the Motown singers who got their start on city street corners in the 1950s and '60s. Then, again, other songs performed by the men remind me of spirituals or "sorrow songs," as W.E.B. DuBois called them. One group, for example, sang "the Lord must help us." Still another sang, "when you got a problem, it's better to kneel down and pray." Through casual conversation, I learned that many of the men are from religious families. That's understandable. Since the early days of colonization, Natal has been one of the most im-

1. "Erlmann, Veit. Jacket notes. *Isicathamiya*. With Cup and Saucer, Jabula Home Defenders, Xolo Home Boys, King Boys, GMC Boys, Durban High Stars, and SABC Easy Walkers. Interstate Music Ltd. Heritage, HT 313, 1986.



*At competitions you'll see a range of ages represented. It's often older or middle-aged men who lead the groups.*

rarity and fraternity against fraternity. Each group tries to outshine the other by impressing the audience with its carefully choreographed steps and song. Some steps are soft and subtle, while others are reminiscent of *ingoma* dance. While the songs performed by the sororities and fraternities are important, it is the steps that drive the audience to call and respond with cheers and whistles. The audience at *isicathamiya* performances must remain silent, as noted previously. However, during the practice sessions it's clear that it's the steps that rouse the audience to applause.

However similar in some ways, *isicathamiya* lyrics and the lyrics of songs performed at step shows couldn't be more different. I'd describe step-show songs as "challenge songs." By this I mean one sorority might boast about its history and virtues, while denouncing the merits of a rival group. This has the effect of encouraging groups to try to outperform one another. The lyrics of *isicathamiya*, on the other hand, often reflect hardships and feelings of alienation, grievances against social injustices, rivals, working conditions, and political demands, not to mention troubles with women. From the early 1920s on, for example, groups have addressed political issues of the time. They often voiced criticisms in solidarity with black political organizations like the African National Congress and the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU). (The ICU was founded in 1919 and became one of the dominant working class organizations of the 1920s.) Indeed, *isicathamiya* has been described as "protest music camouflaged in a Euro-African singing style."<sup>2</sup>

The Pietermaritzburg Home Boys, just as one example, sang "they are running, they are climbing the mountain." The two-line song refers to ordinary daily



struggles, which at times seem as tall and as wide and as insurmountable as a mountain. They also sang, "I'm worrying in my heart," and those worries cover a range of circumstances — job loss, money troubles, etc. The term "home boys," by the way, has the same connotation here that it does in the U.S. It refers to

2. "Durban and Surrounds." *ADA Magazine* n.d., :72.





*A view of Beatrice Street.*

people of common regional origin or kinship ties. So the Pietermaritzburg Home Boys didn't travel from there to compete in the Durban competition that I attended. They live in the Durban metropolitan area.

Not all songs are laden with a heavy theme. Members of the Nongoma Black Tycoons sang "thanks to the South African Traditional Music Association," which was formed in 1989. Speaking of thanks, it's amusing to see performers try to impress the judge of a competition. Some are absolutely shameless. For example, usually the lead singer of a group and perhaps one other will end the group's routine by lingering for a few seconds in front of the judge, bowing, repeatedly, with their hands outstretched in the prayer position. I've seen the lead singer of one group fall down on his knees. The judge always keeps a straight face, though sometimes he'll nod, indicating that he gets the point and that the men should move on.

Unlike the situation in the early years of *isicathamiya*, a significant number of the male performers live in township houses. (Many, though, many still live in hostels.) With some in township houses and others in hostels, the men say it's harder to organize transportation to and from practices. Violence in the hostels also makes it difficult to practice. The Dalton Road Men's Hostel, where numbers of the men stay, has been the site of increased violence between supporters of the

African National Conference and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). The IFP launched a branch in the hostel last December, and within a month's time at least 13 people were killed. The hostel was built in the early 1940s, and it's supposed to house 1,331 people. However, it's grossly overpopulated. In some cases, up to 30 people share one room.

Given the circumstances in which some men live, it's a wonder that they show up at the competitions at all. But they do, and they find it a rewarding experience in more ways than one. The competition works this way: each group pays a joining fee, which goes into a community pot. The top three groups take home a cash prize. How much a group contributes is unclear; I've been given a few explanations of how it works and I'm still confused. But consider this: as many as 30 groups perform during one all-night session. Paulos Msimanga sometimes calls out how much money a group has paid. I've heard R50 (\$13) for one group, for example, and R30 (\$8) for another. Groups range in size from four to 20, so it's possible that a four-person group could take home between R600 (\$167) and R1,500 (\$416), which explains why judges are followed to the toilet. That's no small change when you consider, for example, that trash collectors, laborers and electricity workers employed by the city earn R1,350 (\$375) per month.

There's one other point worth mentioning. While the competition at the YMCA is going on, there's another one taking place two blocks away. So the groups shuttle between the two halls. I've never lasted to the end of a competition, and I feel guilty that I haven't. The regulars know visitors, and they enjoy seeing new faces in the crowd. When I've gotten up to leave and to wade through the crowd to go outside, performers often grab my hands and say, "please don't go. Only a few more, *sisi* (sister)." I've listened to as many as 20 groups, and I vow to stick it out to the very end one of these days. That's a promise I've made and one I'll keep.

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In 1986, an album titled *Isicathamiya* was released by Interstate Music Ltd. of England. The album features songs from seven different groups living at the Glebelands and Dalton Road Hostels in Durban. The following song texts appear on the inside album cover, along with jacket notes by scholar Veit Erlmann.

#### NGIFUNA IMALI

*Ngifuna imali baba nomama*  
baaba good bye.  
*Mina ngifuna imali.*  
*Bonke abantu baba nomama*  
thula du.

I want money, father and mother  
Father, good bye.

I want money.  
Everybody, father and mother, keep quiet.

#### SAWUBONA NTOMBAZANE

*Sawubona Ntombazane.  
Walahla abantabami.*

Hallo, girl!  
You deserted my children.



*Isicathamiya is derived from the Zulu word cathama, "to walk softly." To pronounce the word, here's what you need to know. "C" is a click sound in Zulu. With jaws slightly open, place the tip of the tongue against the upper teeth, then pull the tongue backwards. It's the sound made when expressing annoyance or sorrow. "Th" in Zulu is pronounced like the "t" in "tell" (never as 'this'). Pronounce "a" as in "far" and "i" as in "inn." Also, the second "i" in isicathamiya is silent. So if you ignore the click and break down the word as follows, you'll get:  
is/cata/mi/ya.*

#### BUYA AFRIKA

*Buya Afrika!*

Come back, Africa!

#### SAWUBONA BABA

*Sawubona baba ngendaba enkulu  
yokufuna umfowethu.  
Sawubona baba, sawubona mame,  
sawubona bhuti, sawubona sisi.  
Size lapha nje ngendaba enkulu  
yokufuna umfowethu.  
Yena washiya umakoti nabantwana  
bayahlupheka ekhaya.  
Wayehambe eyosebenza manje  
sekuphele iminyaka eyishumi singazi  
ukuthi washonaphi.  
Sifuna ukubuya nawe mfowethu  
siyobona abantwana.  
Vela, vela, vela mfowethu woza  
musa ukucasha ngabanye.*

Greetings to you father; we have  
come here on an important mission;  
we are searching for our brother.  
Greetings to you father, greetings to  
you mother, greetings to you brother,  
greetings to you sister.  
We have come on an important  
mission; we are searching for our  
brother.  
He left his wife and children; they are  
suffering back home.  
He went in search of work, but now  
ten years have passed without us  
knowing his whereabouts.  
We want to take him back to see the  
children.  
Avail yourself, brother, do not hide  
behind others!



## Current Fellows & Their Activities

**Bacete Bwogo.** A Sudanese from the Shilluk tribe of southern Sudan, Bacete is a physician spending two and one-half years studying health-delivery systems in Costa Rica, Cuba, Kerala State (India) and the Bronx, U.S.A. Bacete did his undergraduate work at the University of Juba and received his M.D. from the University of Alexandria in Egypt. He served as a public-health officer in Port Sudan until 1990, when he moved to England to take advantage of scholarships at the London School of Economics and Oxford University. [THE AMERICAS]

**Cheng Li.** An Assistant Professor of Government at Hamilton College in Clinton, NY, Cheng Li is studying the growth of technocracy and its impact on the economy of the southeastern coast of China. He began his academic life with a Medical Degree from Jing An Medical School in Shanghai, but then did graduate work in Asian Studies and Political Science in the United States, with an M.A. from Berkeley in 1987 and a Ph.D. from Princeton in 1992. [EAST ASIA]

**Adam 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's regional role and growing importance as an actor in the Balkans, 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]

**Cynthia Caron.** With a Masters degree in Forest Science from the Yale School of Forestry and Environment, Cynthia is spending two years in South Asia as ICWA's first John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow. She is studying and writing about the impact of forest-preservation projects on the lives (and land-tenure) of indigenous peoples and local farmers who live on their fringes. Her fellowship includes stays in Bhutan, India and Sri Lanka. [SOUTH ASIA/Forest & Society]

**Hisham Ahmed.** Born blind in the Palestinian Dheisheh Refugee Camp near Bethlehem, Hisham finished his A-levels with the fifth highest score out of 13,000 students throughout Israel. He received a B.A. in political science on a scholarship from Illinois State University and his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of California in Santa Barbara. Back in East Jerusalem and still blind, Hisham plans to gather oral histories from a broad selection of Palestinians to produce a "Portrait of Palestine" at this crucial point in Middle Eastern history. [MIDEAST/N. AFRICA]

**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. She plans to travel and live in Namibia and Zimbabwe as well as South Africa. [sub-SAHARA]

**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 and an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators, but most recently managed a \$7 million developing-country revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle. Pramila is spending two years in India tracing her roots and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

**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]

**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. While with the ACLU, she also conducted a Seminar on Women in the Law at Fordham Law School in New York. [sub-SAHARA]

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