

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DH - 20
Madagascar

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203 Blvd. Raspail
Paris, 14e

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Not many outsiders visit the distant island of Madagascar. Indeed no one, including the Malagasies themselves (1), is quite sure where Madagascar belongs. Geographically and politically, it seems to belong to Africa; Madagascar is a member of several inter-African groups. But by race, language and culture, the Malagasies belong to Southeast Asia, though for many centuries they have had virtually no contact with their former homeland. They resent being identified as "Africans".

In this isolated setting, the colonial experience of Madagascar was different from that of French-ruled West Africa. The Malagasies responded to the French conquest in 1896 with unusual docility and occasional bloody rebellion; about 100,000 people died in each of two major revolts, one just after the conquest, the other in 1947. Partly because there was a working political system to be destroyed, rather than tribal groupings as in Africa, partly perhaps because of the Malagasies' docility, the French presence weighed more heavily here than in West Africa. Docility is illustrated by an incident we saw one evening in the capital city of Tananarive, an incident we were later told was "typical". A French teenager was involved in an argument with a Malagasy teenager. The French boy was alone on the sidewalk (he had a couple of friends in a car); the Malagasy was accompanied by about ten other Malagasies. The French boy went up to the Malagasy, who was bigger than he, and hit him a blow that would hardly have felled a rabbit. The Malagasy went down on the sidewalk in a heap. He got up and got in a car, followed by a friend. The French boy came to the car, passing through the crowd of Malagasy youths, pulled them both out, hit the Malagasy another harmless blow, and once more the Malagasy dropped to the sidewalk. The other Malagasies did nothing. This, we were sure, would not have happened in West Africa, and we asked a Malagasy onlooker why the other youths had not intervened. "We are Orientals," he said, and that was the answer we got from other Malagasies. Yet Madagascar has been independent for almost three years.

Little has happened here since independence. Madagascar's economy
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(1) A note for those in the audience who seem puzzled about the very name of the place. The name of the nation is still Madagascar. The official title of the state is 'Malagasy Republic' (Republique Malgache in French) just as the official title of the French state is - even under its present Guide - 'Republique Francaise' rather than 'France'. If 'France' is proper usage to refer to the state rather than the place, so is 'Madagascar'. 'Malagasy' is the adjective and the name of the people.

is still a hothouse plant attached to France by a web of special relationships: preferential prices for Malagasy exports to France, protection for French goods in the Malagasy market, shipping and the export-import trade, and much internal trade as well, in the hands of French companies. Following a familiar pattern, small trade is in the hands of other foreigners (mostly Hindus and Chinese) who hold the Malagasy peasant in the grip of usury. What local capital there is goes to construction in the capital, and the traders find there is more money in importing than in local production. As a result, if you ask for a beer in a cafe, you get Alsatian beer, though excellent beer is made in Madagascar; and bottled water is hauled all the way from Evian (the Malagasy railroad is said to have the highest freight rates in the world) though, again, mineral water is bottled locally.

Not surprisingly, the trend of the Malgache economy has been if anything downward in the last decade. Indeed, Madagascar is less independent, makes less financial effort toward development, now than ten years ago. According to figures published by the government's Commissariat General au Plan, local resources in 1950 covered the entire ordinary budget and 57% of the development budget; by 1960 local resources covered only 84% of the ordinary budget and none of the development budget. Imports of capital goods decreased over those ten years, while consumer imports increased. The real income of the peasant population probably has been dropping. Madagascar has more cattle (8 million) than people (5.5 million) and the price of beef on the hoof (6¢ a lb.) is one of the lowest in the world. Yet the Malagasy suffer from a severe protein deficiency and there is no export market for beef since the French army stopped buying it.

Some have benefitted. "The increase in national income in the past ten years has gone to consumption not to investment, to imports not to local production," according to the Commissariat General. It has gone to the new privileged class of government employes. While peasant income remained stagnant, urban salaries doubled or tripled; the gap between them has "widened dangerously". The elite orientation of the government's spending is perhaps best symbolized by the Malagasy airline. What the island needs above all are roads, to encourage internal trade and open up new areas of settlement. But the national airline, alarmingly known as Madair, makes daily flights to many of its 90 airfields and boasts

Photos on opposite page at left, by Jean Claude Nourault, show Malagasy types. Photo at top right shows rice paddy with lines marking individual plots. Center right, cattle being used to plow rice paddy. Bottom right, the curious custom of 'retournement'. Bones of ancestors, wrapped in cloth, are brought out of mausoleum every so often and carried around by the dancing members of the family; the purpose is to show the ancestors what is happening today. How often it is done depends on how much money the family has for new wrapping cloths. (Photos at right by Bernard Pauthenier)



of having "the most frequent service in the world". Officials can fly; but peasants cannot get their produce out. When you fly to Majunga, the sleepy West coast port where the jetty is silted up and unusable because of erosion upcountry, you land at a fancy new airport that can handle Boeing 707 jets. On the way to town, you pass by a smaller, abandoned airport. Why the new airport? Because the government wanted jet flights to Madagascar and built a jet airport at Tananarive (which already had an airport adequate for anything but the big jets). This in turn required an alternate landing field - so the Majunga field was built. But the Tananarive field is an hour's drive from the city, and there is talk of building still another field closer to town... There is talk, also, that Madair will buy its own Boeing (the present flights are by Air France).

The Madair episode was cited by an opposition leader, Dr. Bertrand Ravelonanosy, who reached this conclusion: "I'm the first to say to all of you, Americans, French, Germans, Russians - keep your money. We don't need it. All we'll do with it is build another airport." But, despite opposition sniping at such inviting targets, politics in Madagascar is based much more on race than on the island's social problems. The opposition is centered in the Merina people of the uplands, who ruled the island before the French and who sparked the two major revolts. There was, and is, a natural alliance between the less advanced coastal peoples and the French against the Merinas; the government is now in the hands of the coastal peoples, who make up three-quarters of the population. But the Merinas, far ahead in education, hold most high civil service jobs: in many offices, only the minister and the janitor are from the coast. Many Merinas stay on in France after going there to study; this of course increases Madagascar's dependence on French administrators and technicians. It is customary in U.S. Embassy circles to call the Merina opposition "Communist", and it is perhaps true that some opposition groups receive their main outside support from the French Communist party. But political talk among the Merina always comes around to "we", the Merina, and "they", the coastals. In any case, a Merina government would seem likely (whatever its foreign orientation) to have even greater political obligations to the urban elite, mainly Merina, than does the present regime. Some people predict another revolt like that of 1947, but the gendarmerie (staffed by coastals, officered by Frenchmen) seems adequate to control the country.

It seems only fair to the gentle reader to end this gloomy report on a more cheerful note. Madagascar gets very few tourists. The countryside is attractive and interesting, the people are unique, the palaces of the 19th Century queens are still in existence. The climate is nice, the beaches are good, and the girls are pretty. If you happen to be in Nairobi, you can fly to Tananarive in a few hours. By jet, of course.

Sincerely,

David Hapgood