

EDINBURGH 1910: “Roots and fruits” – Madagascar - Tony Ashcroft

I arrived in Madagascar in 1958 to a country in political turmoil. President De Gaulle of France had just asked all countries within the French Community of Nations whether they wanted to stay within the Community or leave and proceed into the future as independent nations. Madagascar decided that it wanted independence within French influence and support.

At that time the Malagasy people had been asked to elect their first president. They chose Tsiranana for this very important position. Interestingly he was not a member of the dominant Imerina tribe but a Tsimihety. While a powerful people the Tsimihety were not educationally, commercially or politically dominant and had no history of leadership throughout the whole island. This is probably a lesson in democracy because without this someone from the dominant Imerina tribe would have almost surely been elected.

For many years the Tanala or forest people had been promised a missionary of their own, in line with traditional missionary thinking. This promise had been supported by both the London Missionary Society in Madagascar and by the missionary society in London. It was to fill this position I was sent. I spent some months with the retiring missionary who combined mission work in Betsileo with the neighbouring Tanala. Over many years he had done excellent work but had not brought his thinking into the modern period. Neither had the committee in London or Madagascar. Given the fact that missionaries were on the field for five years with one year at home and that the Second World war greatly extended their stay in Madagascar and also the poor communications at this time it is not surprising that the future had not figured greatly in their thinking.

It was planned that there should be a mission station in the forest area, comprising a mission house, a school and boarding homes for pupils. This might be augmented later with a bible school for the training of forest pastors. The first decision was to be made where to construct this considerable undertaking. I searched with senior members of the local church committee for a suitable position. Suitability demanded a flat area with an adequate water supply, adequate roads, medical support for a large number of often weak persons and the willingness of staff from more advanced areas to work there. There was also the question of finance for such a large scheme. I could find no positive answer to any of the necessary requirements for the success of the venture. By this time with the coming of younger missionaries and a movement away from old thinking it is doubtful whether there would have been sufficient enthusiasm or money forthcoming from either London or the local committee to complete the old plan. Certainly I could not put this forward as a viable undertaking. This was a huge disappointment to myself and the local Tanala Church which had been promised this wonderful opportunity for many years. I was sad to leave the forest church and the people but such disappointment causes deep hurt and some resentment.

Soon after a senior and very well qualified Malagasy pastor was elected to be in charge of the Tanala area. This led me to consider what the place of the missionary was in a future Malagasy church.

It was then that I realised that my term in Madagascar was for a limited period and probably not for life as I had been led to believe. My aim was to encourage self sufficiency in a church well able to govern itself.

The evolving political situation was bound to affect the church which had for many years educated and encouraged further education in French universities. As the older missionaries retired and were replaced by younger ones, well educated and competent Malagasy church people were beginning to work alongside them.

For many years there had been co-operation between the main protestant churches in the north of the island, the churches founded by the London Missionary Society, the Paris Missionary Society and the Society of Friends. The other two societies had been invited in to work in Madagascar by the London Missionary Society for specific reasons. For instance, the Paris Missionary Society which was supported by the protestant church in France came in as proof to the french government of the time that protestants who had their roots in the United Kingdom were not enemies. This acted as a very necessary reminder that protestants could be supporters of the French government thereby allowing malagasy protestants to worship with relative freedom from interference. The Society of Friends was invited in because of their particular expertise. This closeness led to the belief among the leaders of the three churches, missionary and malagasy that their churches ought to be one. After many years of talks, given the generosity and flexibility of the malagasy church and its leaders union came about and the united church was called The Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar. Of course the churches of The Society of Friends were not entirely in tune with the other churches but they had been given part of the London Missionary Society area when they were invited in to Madagascar and many of their churches still observed the sacraments and so this was not seen as a problem in the unity talks. So we have in the north of Madagascar a very strong and flexible church.

Meanwhile the political situation deteriorated as Tsiranana became too ill to govern and keep those who would take advantage of his weakened situation under control. During this time the opposition manned and supported by the church came into its own. Government agents were everywhere and even sermons by missionaries were scrutinised. Church leadership of the opposition was strong but lacked the power to overthrow the existing government. One incident provokes mirth. Students of the university in Antananarivo marched in protest at government actions and were treated rigorously. Many were transported to an island prison just off the coast of Madagascar. They turned out to be sons and daughters of very influential people both in the government and

in society. They were returned to their homes with great speed !

Up to this time Madagascar had been supported by the west, particularly the French who were very generous. Now the government leaned towards the communist bloc for support. Everything began to fall apart. Socialism was forced on people who were very family orientated causing great upheaval. Living standards fell. Good malagasy rice was sold for a high price and poor rice imported to replace it. This proved to be laced with preservatives and caused disturbance medically as well as taste wise. The whole economy and social mores deteriorated. This state lasted for about thirty years during which time many well educated people emigrated to France.

Happily at the beginning of this century a new president who is a member of the Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar was elected. He is changing the old corrupt ways. The future of Madagascar looks much better.

Since leaving the Tanala in the hands of a very capable local pastor I am convinced that my decision to hand over my missionary responsibility to the malagasy church was the right one. Over the years my oversight of the churches in the Betsileo area was taken over by local leaders and the pastoral college where I had become director was given to someone more capable than I was. To me this was success.

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