

New Year at Nosy Be

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Joel, a very welcoming Malagasy (Malgache in French) picked us up from the Antananarivo airport on December 29, 2022. I insisted on acquiring a local SIM card to avoid dependence on our hosts' hotspots. In facilitating this request as our host grumbled about my supposed "internet addiction", I had the opportunity of a bird's eye view of undulating Antananarivo and how architects have, over decades, adapted to nature with respect to building constructions. Fruits were noticeable on the roadside as in many African cities. My wife was excited about the mangoes. We didn't have Ariary, the local currency. Very unusual for a former French colony in Africa to have a local currency. Does it mean French influence is weak in Madagascar? Well, Joel bought some mangoes for dinner and they were delicious.

Joel returned us to the local airport on the following day, on our way to Nosy Be. During the airport rides and on my inquiry, Joel taught us that Nosy is a Malagasy word for Island and "Be" translates into Big. He wasted no time in announcing that Nosy Be is the tenth most beautiful Island in the world. I have, overtime learnt not to contest this sort of claim and instead keep my new-found friendship.

When one looks at a map of Africa, it is easy to see the huge Island of Madagascar, towards the bottom, off the eastern coast of Africa. The same phenomenon being reported as having started towards the eventual separation of the Horn of Africa through to the East Rift Valley and further down to separate this land mass from the rest of Africa, is said to have happened some 150 million years ago with respect to India and Madagascar. But why did India drift so far away and Madagascar remained closer to mother Africa?

Before meeting Joel, I had not known many Malagasy people aside from Ms. Lalao Raorisa, an amiable colleague I worked with in Guinea-Bissau. I assumed they are all not hot blooded like Southern Nigerians until when at the airport two women, (out of about 15 or so restless passengers), were shouting at the air Madagascar officials. Their flight had been delayed for several hours that day before eventual cancellation. When ours that was slightly delayed was called, I thought they would block our departure, but wiser counsel prevailed. The plane was an ATR 72, a propeller engine aircraft made by the Dutch on which I had flown a number of times while working at UN peace support operations.

We arrived at Nosy Be late. Trying to eat late dinner, at Nosy Be Hotel, and against the standing order of my Physician, it was a relief listening to the bellowing of Nigerian music: "... my Baba no be Dangote ...". Please do not ask me about the name of the artist. My brain is extra dull when it comes to recanting the names of artists and their respective music, plays and movies. The huge dining room was nicely crafted out of a huge Baobab tree that served as the pillar. It must have been the kind of single pillar that Biblical Samson pulled down when he realised that he had been betrayed by the woman he loved.

On the following day, December 31st, we took a taxi into town. Stalin, our driver, was very friendly but only spoke French. Nosy Be, like Antananarivo, is a case of undulating hills and valleys with a descent into the Indian Ocean, in the case of the former. Working in Kenya and Liberia had awoken in me an interest in nature: animals and water. Stalin showed a vast body of water said to be a sacred lake. He didn't know why it is sacred but claims it is full of crocodiles. I asked if he had ever seen a crocodile there before, or knew someone who had seen one. His answer was in the negative. When I visited the spot a second time, I had the opportunity of asking an elderly lady who had gone to freshen up at the lake the

same question. She also responded in the negative. Great if a taboo provides protection for the waters that humans depend upon.

We drove to the very small sleepy seaport. There were remnants of cannons the French had used to suppress the people and drive away other Europeans as they formally colonised Madagascar as the British gave up any claim, towards the end of the 19th Century.

It was not that I expected to see many containers at a port in a small Island. Nonetheless, the situation brought to mind how black Africans have over time failed to carve out a niche in the movement of cargo around the world.

Marcus Garvey, that illustrious African and Pan-Africanist from Jamaica, whose thoughts joined with others, influenced decolonisation of Africa had set up Universal Negro Improvement Association in 1914. As part his pride in being a black man sought economic empowerment of Africans and the return to Africa for willing African people. In pursuit of his goal, he set up the Black Star Lines (BSL) in 1919 after raising \$800,000 from African-Americans eager to purchase stocks in his project only to be politically tried and jailed for mail fraud. He was eventually pardoned by Calvin Coolidge as US President. With mismanagement and sabotage his project failed in 1921.

Kwame Nkrumah, who (like Nnamdi Azikiwe), had benefited from Garveyism and Pan-Africanism wasted no time in starting BSL in Ghana in 1957.

Nigerians had followed suit and started the Nigerian National Shipping Line (NNSL) backed by an Act of Parliament. NNSL was established in 1959 to boost economic nationalism and earn money from cargo freight. Starting with four second-hand ships in 1959. Nigeria held 51 per cent of shares of the paid-up capital of 4 million pounds sterling as British Companies, Elder Dempster Line and Palm Line held the remaining 49% between themselves. The Nigerians bought up the two partners in 1961.

The fleet grew to 15 vessels by 1971. A new set of 19 vessels were ordered and by the time the first was delivered in 1976/77, technology had started to change and the ordered ships could not handle the level of containerisation that was becoming the order of the day. Mismanagement and corruption resulted in debts piled up. Nigerian ships were being seized in Europe. Attempts to keep NNSL afloat failed. Mismanagement, fierce external competition and corruption ensured NNSL's liquidation in 1995. From then on, Nigeria reportedly pays to international interests, about \$5 billion annually for freight services. The Ghana Black Star Line also failed in 1998. Why have small European countries succeeded? The failure of West Africa on shipping cannot be explained away by the fact that NNSL and BSL were public concerns. Or why haven't we realised a successful private shipping concern in West Africa since 1998? Leadership deficit and Corruption are definitely not limited to the public sector as the capitalist West would like to emphasise.

On corruption, I sensed it seeing many policemen appearing to be checking papers of tricycles and cars. On my inquiry, a guide informed me that all was for the police to extract their tolls. I asked why they had not stopped us and learnt they do not stop foreigners. What a relief? At least they have a better sense of propriety than in my country.

We drove to the market at Hell-Ville, the capital of Nosy Be province. Yes, Hell, as it got its name from the name of Admiral de Hell, a former French Governor. The market reminded me of Nairobi city market which is by far bigger but it is the same concept of a covered, but open building in which hustle and bustle is taking place over trading in small goods that offer pittance as profit. Outside were women selling

“khat”, the stimulant leaf classified as addictive narcotic by some, that is very popular in Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia, Yemen etc.

We returned to the hotel to await the New Year vigil. We had requested to join the table of Fatma Samoura – a Senegalese, resident of Nosy Be. Fatma Samoura is better known all over the world as an African international trail blazer who is the current FIFA Secretary-General, a post she has creditably held since 2016. She was recruited from the UN as Resident Coordinator in Nigeria, to oversee FIFA reforms and, as expected, has been boosting female soccer. Brainy, beautiful and courageous Fatma, had been UN Resident Coordinator in Madagascar and became attached to Nosy Be, keeping a luxurious home meant for Presidents there.

As the dinner prelude to the New Year started, I sat by a friend, Abdou Dieng who had retired as a senior UN official who, like myself has, so far, refused to hang his gloves into a life of sleeping all day. I sought to know, aside from an inclement environment, why Madagascar has remained one of the poorest countries in the world.

Fatma and I got talking. She switched seats with Abdou and gave me a detailed lecture, some of which I will add to my story on Antananarivo. Suffice it to state that I also learnt a major aspect of Fatma.

Sad that twin infanticide was being practiced in Madagascar until very recently. It was practiced in Nigeria, specifically among the Efik of Calabar as well as at Arochukwu among the Igbo. A Scottish missionary, Mary Slessor, arrived Calabar in 1876 at age 28 and devoted her life to the stopping of the cultural practice of seeing twins as a curse. The twins were abandoned to die in the forest. She saved many. In today’s world when the view of peace has been broadened, she would have received the Nobel Award for Peace.

In the case of Madagascar, the practice in Mananjary came out of a curse placed on twin births. There was a story that there was a war at which the people under attack escaped safely only for the king to realise that one of his twins was missing. He went back to look for him and never returned. The people placed a curse on twin births.

Parents who had twins had to abandon them or they themselves were banished from the community. The practice was legislated against in 1982 but old habits die hard. So, Fatma became an advocate for the extermination of this evil practice. She set up a settlement in support of abandoned twins and their parents at the twin village in Mananjary. The settlement received support from funds she raised and her earnings.

Fatma demonstrated courage by ignoring the local “fady” or taboo on twin curse in spite of insinuations of harm to befall her. She told the story of her navigating the Pangalanes canal from Mananjary to Fanivelona to attend the celebration of the oldest twins living in the community, thirty years after the abolition of the “fady kabana”. She was warned not to undertake the journey that would upset the ancestors. Determined, she embarked on the journey but got lost in the body of waters with two snakes swimming along on both sides of her boat. It seemed the ancestors had sealed her fate but she completed the journey several hours late.

Similarly, she demonstrated courage not long after she was appointed FIFA Secretary-General by standing up to Theresa May as British Prime Minister over British soccer players wearing poppies (deemed a political symbol) at FIFA matches in memory of British fallen heroes. She had argued that others also have heroes and Remembrance Days and should we all wear insignias to the football pitch. Nigeria changed its own Remembrance Day to January 15th as opposed to the British November 11th. If Britain can wear it, why shouldn’t Nigerians, Thais and 54 African Countries? After all, they say what is good for

the Goose is good for the Gander. But then, the reality of international politics is well put in George Orwell's Animal Farm: "All Animals are equal, but some are more equal than others".

Unfortunately, for the twins' settlement at Mananjary, Cyclone Batsirai in early February 2022 wiped out the settlement. I understand it's currently being gradually rebuilt. Between January and March last year, 5 cyclones hit Madagascar resulting in 123 fatalities and huge losses in material resources for a poor country.

January 1st was much of dining and relaxing. A sumptuous beach-side lunch at the invitation of Fatma as well as a boat ride to a nearby Island to collect shells. Seeing the sunset on Mount Passot was exciting and spectacular.

January 2nd, 2023 provided the opportunity I had been waiting for: interaction with nature at Lemur Park or Lemuria land. Most maps of Africa do not easily show many Islands adjoining the big Island of Madagascar, including Nosy Be on the north west portion. There are several biological species that are unique to Madagascar with the most popular being the Lemur – a beautiful type of monkey. The Lemurs were all over the place even before we entered the park. I had beautiful pictures of different species of Lemurs: Dancing Lemur, Browned Lemur; Crowned Lemur etc.

There were Ylang Ylang trees all over. Our first stop was at the Ylang Ylang factory that was established by an Indian family in 1889. The flowers are picked. I was informed that 500 kg of the flowers mixed with 300 litres of water to provide 12 litres of oil. This oil, is reportedly the base product for some perfume brands.

It was interesting to see a Tortoise named: Napoleon, said to be 212 years old in a lethargic state as Bonaparte 180 years old was close-by Josephine, said to be 80 years old. We moved on to see the Dancing Lemur only to be jolted with some loud sound. My guide asked us to rush back and see Bonaparte and Josephine making love. Why do animals, including humans, make involuntary sounds while in the process? Well, I was able to have a video recording of what was left of the copulation. I chose to carry what I think is a huge panther chameleon. The claws produced a scratchy feeling I did not quite enjoy. There were many other reptiles, Iguana, Crocodiles, Boa Constrictor etc.

A Sakalava (one of eighteen ethnic groups in Madagascar) Queen planted a Ficus – Banyan tree that has spread into a huge grove covering some 5,000 sq. metres. Buddha had reportedly received inspiration under a Banyan tree. The roots come from up the tree like threads to touch the ground in order to become roots properly so called. But how was the first tree planted? The Sakalava people are Animists and not Buddhists. So, I visited the grove where people express wishes. It is relieving to see tourists engaging and enjoying the allure around the relatively calm Indian Ocean again, after the Covid-19 pandemic.

The first and only time I had a massage was in 1994. I never thought I would again until January 3rd on the way to the airport. It was pleasant. Trying to have lunch at the hotel where my wife and I as well as our host had a massage were four young Yoruba ladies chatting away with their funny Oyinbo accent.

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