

Newsletter

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Anglo-Malagasy
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Society news

The Society held a successful online event on 7th November 2020 with a presentation by the environmental biologist Nina Finley and a short film from Blue Ventures on the way of life for a Vezo fisherwoman in south-west Madagascar. The meeting also heard an update from Antananarivo on the latest impact of the Covid-19 virus and had an introduction to the UK's new ambassador to Madagascar and the Comoros, David Ashley, who took up his position in December.

The next Society meeting will also be online and on Saturday 20th February 2021, starting at 2pm and running for approx. ninety minutes. If you would like to attend please send an email to anglomalagasy@gmail.com to register your interest and we shall send more details nearer the day.

There are details of events and other topics on Facebook and on our website at www.anglo-malagasysociety.co.uk.

We shall publish the next newsletter as of March 2021. Please send any material for inclusion as well as any changes in your contact details to the editor Julian Cooke, whose e-mail address is juliancooke@yahoo.co.uk.

There remain an elusive four previous editions of the newsletter, which would complete our archive: numbers 7 (1980), 13 & 14 (1984-5) and 16 (1986). The first supplement with stories from earlier editions is now available.

The Society was involved in the auction in December for items related to Queen Ranavalona III including a dress belonging to Princess Ramisindrazana, which the Malagasy government ended up securing for £43,000 (plus the buyer's premium of 25%). President Andry Rajoelina said that 'Madagascar attaches great importance to the acquisition of these royal objects as part of our re-appropriation of Madagascar's national history and cultural heritage' and that they would be displayed in the recently-restored Queen's Palace.

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There are more details in a blog by the auction house Kerry Taylor Auctions available at <https://www.kerrytaylorauctions.com/blog/51/> . *The Guardian* had two articles on the auction at <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/dec/06/remarkable-story-of-madagascars-last-queen-emerges-from-surrey-attic> and then a further one reporting on the outcome at <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/dec/09/madagascar-relics-queen-ranavalona-iii>.

Politics in Madagascar

In early October President Andry Rajoelina attended the opening of the new Pharmalagasy factory at Tanjombato near Antananarivo, accompanied by members of the World Health Organisation, the diplomatic corps and former heads of state in Didier Ratsiraka and Norbert Lala Ratsirahonana. He announced the launch of a capsule version of the controversial Covid Organics, the artemisia-based herbal remedy that some 7m people in Madagascar had taken as an infusion. The state research institute IMRA announced at the end of the month that it was suspending production as stock levels were high, given reduced demand.

At a meeting on the fringe of the United Nations General Assembly on 10th October the Malagasy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Djacoba Tehindrazanarivelo, called on the Non-Aligned Movement to support the country's claim to the Iles Eparses. The minister told the Assembly that the islands represented a form of unfinished decolonisation.

In mid-October Harry Laurent Rahajason, known as Rolly Mercia, was sentenced to three years and eight months in prison for complicity in an unauthorised demonstration and public order offences, which was linked to opposition to Covid Organics. He was a former Minister of Communication under Rajoelina's predecessor Hery Rajaonarimampianina and had been close to Rajoelina, having served as vice-president of his MAPAR party; he became the third member of the opposition to be imprisoned.

On 18th October Rajoelina announced an end to the emergency measures first imposed in March saying that the coronavirus Covid-19 had been beaten – the previous week had seen one virus-related death and 131 new cases, if based on a reduced number of tests. The country had had a reported 238 deaths from a little over 16,000 cases. However, the proposed resumption of regional flights at the end of the month was postponed while a number of restrictions remained in place, such as with the wearing of masks if not widely observed – 680 members of the public were forced to clean the streets or buildings in one day as a punishment after a crack-down. On 22nd October the civil aviation authority banned flights from a further ten European countries including the UK, which mainly affected tourism to Nosy Be where the airport had remained open.

The changes to the Senate remained an important political issue in Madagascar. In mid-October the Haute Cour Constitutionnelle (HCC) rejected a petition from a number of civil society organisations and from certain members of the Senate that the decree in September which had convoked an electoral college to vote on the proposed changes was unconstitutional. The few senators present at the opening of the new session of parliament on 27th October criticised the decision to withhold funds from the upper house. The candidates for the elections came mostly

from the platform supporting Rajoelina and his allies, as well as some independents. The TIM party of former president Marc Ravalomanana and HVM, which backed Rajaonarimampianina, boycotted the elections, which they said were illegal and unconstitutional.

The proposal to increase the number of regions in the country to twenty-three with the long-mooted division of Vatovavy Fitovinany into two met a degree of opposition led by the deputy Jean Brunelle Razafitsiandraofa, a vice-president of the National Assembly.

On 4th November a platform Dinike (*Dina Iombonan-Kevitra*) comprising fourteen political parties and eleven civil society organisations called on Madagascar's Council of Churches (FFKM) to renew its efforts at national reconciliation. In December the council set up to address the issue, the Conseil du Fampihavanana Malagasy (CFM), noted that it had approved an amnesty for nine people involved in the political process from 2002 to 2009 and had agreed reparations for a further twenty.

On 7th November Rajoelina presided at a ceremony to re-launch the Rova in Antananarivo, which he said would now be named Rovan'i Madagasikara and would serve as a modern museum. Rajoelina, whose family had helped to fund the work through the Ministry of Culture, called also for the return from the Natural History Museum in Paris of the skull of the Menabe king Toera. The press noted the absence of the former presidents Ratsiraka and Ravalomanana as well as of Raymond Ranjeva, president of the Malagasy Academy. On 3rd November the French government agreed to return to Madagascar the crown which had topped the throne of Queen Ravalona III, which had been in the Joffre Army Museum, in a move which was later clarified as being a loan for five years contingent on approval through a new law, which the French Senate opposed. The French ambassador Christophe Bouchard noted that it had been an unusual gesture and formed part of wider relations with France, which would support Madagascar's bid to have the Rova inscribed on the UNESCO list for World Heritage. In December the French National Assembly approved the return of historic objects to Benin and Niger, linked to those under debate in Madagascar.

By mid-November there was increasing concern that the government had not yet made public the details of the finance bill it had agreed several weeks before; it was finally presented on 20th November to the National Assembly, which approved it after just two hours' debate.

The National Assembly was also due to decide on the submission to the Haute Cour de Justice (HCJ) of the cases of four former ministers, said to be Onitiana Realy, Anthelme Ramparany, Julien Reboza and Mamy Lalatiana Andriamanarivo, the first two of whom were abroad and the fourth reported to have the coronavirus Covid-19.

In mid-November there were concerns that large crowds attending concerts by the South African singer Nomcebo Zikode and those watching the national football side, who were playing the Ivory Coast in Toamasina, had shown no regard for restrictions and that there was a risk of a second wave in the coronavirus. As of 19th November the tally had been a relatively modest reported 17,310 cases and 250 deaths, although this was in part due to the limited level of testing. The government was reported to have decided not to procure any doses of the various vaccines against Covid-19, nor to participate in the WHO-led Covax programme for

poorer countries. On 30th November Ravalomanana was questioned by the police after he attended a gathering to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the FJKM church at Soavinandriana.

At the start of December and shortly before its role changed, the Senate announced plans for a parliamentary investigation into the government's handling of the Covid-19 crisis, the prison outbreak at Faranfangana in August, the import of arms into the country and the number of duplicated names on the electoral list. By December there had been limited progress on the proposed investigation into the corruption cases which the National Assembly had passed at end October to the Haute Cour de Justice to consider; seven of the twelve investigations were deferred and then the whole process was put back to at least May 2021. The Assembly did debate the affair of the Villa Elisabeth at Ivandry during the Transition, although there was not a quorum.

The Senate approved the government's finance bill with three proposed amendments, to equalise more the payments to each region, to reduce the ambitious allocation to the Ministry of Youth and Sports and to re-allocate these funds to Health and Agriculture. The lower house rejected the amendments and the Senate adopted the law on a second reading by 22 votes to 15.

In early December nine in ten students at the university in Antsiranana were reported to have tested positive for the virus and there were fears of a resurgence in the wider Diana region given the amount of travel in and out of Nosy Be. The Ministry of Health imposed further restrictions on the region as well as those of Analamanga and Sofia. A report from the Pasteur Institute and the Ministry of Health indicated that some 40% of Malagasy people had been infected by the virus, based on an analysis of blood samples. Rajoelina again noted that the country had been able to beat the virus, although it was unable to export Covid Organics to save the world. The World Bank and other donors advocated a vaccination programme in part to help to re-build the tourism industry.

On 5th December the government fixed the price of rice at 550 ariary (about 10p) per *kapoaka*, a unit of some 350 , following a sharp rise in prices which also reflected an increase on global markets. On 8th December Rajoelina gave each of his ministers five weeks to set out a detailed development plan for him to incorporate into his Plan pour l'Emergence de Madagascar (PEM). He also noted in a summit of the African Union held by videoconference that Madagascar's objective for the Iles Eparses was to find a positive solution reflecting the aspirations of France as well. The foreign minister Djacoba Tehindrazanarivelo nonetheless told the French ambassador Christophe Bouchard that Madagascar was still strongly opposed to France creating a natural reserve around the Iles Glorieuses.

The elections for the Senate proceeded. There were reports of financial inducements from candidates to the 12,465 electors, mostly mayors, of whom 11,642 participated in the vote. While the HCC would confirm the results in January, there was no surprise that the IRD, the platform supporting Rajoelina, took ten of the twelve seats with the others going to the MMM party led by Hajo Andrianainarivelo, an ally of the president. Rajoelina also has the right to nominate senators for the six remaining seats.

On 23rd December a former head of the state utility JIRAMA, Désiré Rasidy, was sentenced to four years in prison for money-laundering, illicit gains and favouritism; three others received

prison sentences. In November Ahmad Ahmad, a former sports minister, was suspended from his position as head of Africa for five years by FIFA.

Rajoelina was invited by the actor Tom Cruise to join him after Christmas on the resort island of Ankaon to the north of Madagascar, which he was reported to have rented for nine days for \$270,000.

Economic and social matters

Famine in south

The south of Madagascar has struggled with persistent challenges from drought and food insecurity, which has worsened again. The World Food Programme warned in November that the region faced a humanitarian catastrophe and estimated that \$35m was needed to deal with it; there is a report at <https://reliefweb.int/report/madagascar/madagascar-drought-and-covid-19-push-15-million-people-brink>.

There were concerns over poor governance: 833 tonnes of rice from USAID which had arrived in the country in July had not reached the Androy district by November. In early October the army said it would send 405 soldiers to the south to provide logistical support in dealing with the famine and Andry Rajoelina said on a visit that the south had always been his priority. He announced plans to open medical centres in four districts, new pipelines to distribute water and a foodstuffs factory in Tolagnaro, as well as the rehabilitation of the RN13 from Ihosy to the port.

In December there were an estimated 900,000 people without food in the region and over 1.3m at risk of famine. The funds needed were put at \$60m and in December the US provided \$100m to deal with short-term needs and to address longer-term issues. It backed three projects through Catholic Relief Services and the Adventist Development and Relief Agency: the Firangà project to provide \$10 million in emergency food assistance to some 222,000 people in the Atsimo Andrefana and Androy regions; the \$45 million Maharo development project to address long-term nutritional needs for 279,000 people in the same areas; and the \$45m Fiovana project, intended over five years to reduce food insecurity for more than 428,000 people in the regions of Vatovavy-Fitovinany and Atsimo Atsinanana.

A Mongabay article in December noted that the region has witnessed sixteen famines or *kere* since 1896, eight of which have occurred in the past four decades. There are more details at <https://news.mongabay.com/2020/12/in-madagascars-hungry-south-drought-pushes-more-than-1-million-to-brink-of-famine>.



Voahary Rakotovelomananstoa, Madagascar's Minister of Water, announced plans in December to install 120 10,000 litre cisterns next to the usual standpipes in the capital.



News24 carried a short news clip on the famine including how people had resorted to eating a mixture of clay and tamarind in an effort to counter their hunger; the details are at <https://www.news24.com/news24/africa/news/watch-people-eat-clay-to-stave-off-hunger-in-drought-hit-madagascar-20201204>.

In October Madagascar was ranked 105th in a Global Hunger Index, ahead only of East Timor and Chad. There is potential of some relief through solar power: in October the French start-up company Mascacara Renewable Water signed an agreement with Mada Green Power for solar-powered de-salination units.

Finance and aid

Madagascar's economy is expected to have contracted by approximately 4% in 2020 with the mining and tourism sectors having been particularly hard hit. The government's finance bill, the Loi des Finances, in November forecast a growth rate of 4.5% for the economy for 2021, compared to a forecast by the IMF of 3%, and earmarked funds for a number of presidential projects, although 11% of the total budget was not specified.

The government also estimated that its budget deficit would fall to 5.5% of gross domestic product in 2021 from 6.3% and expected to see net revenue rise by 39% to 6.4 tn ariary (£1.2 billion). Its budgeted expenditure amounted to 11.4 tn ariary, up from 10.6 tn ariary, with external grants of some £300m due to make up the difference. The Ministry of Economics and Finance said the state would target employment-generating sectors such as construction, rural economy, handicrafts and entrepreneurship. The government also reduced the excise duty on telecommunications back to 8% from the 10% level that applied as of 2020.

The World Bank reported that the poverty index in Madagascar would reach 77.4% in 2020 and 78.1% in 2021, the worst level since 2012.

In late October Samifin estimated that money-laundering had amounted to 579bn ariary (£120m) in 2019 compared to 113bn ariary in 2018 and noted that there had been a higher incidence of such laundering already in 2020 compared to the whole of the previous year. A report noted that a proportion of the \$716m the state had received as aid for the coronavirus crisis had been misappropriated. At the start of November the Ministry of Finance reported that the state had received \$673.4m of which \$381m had been disbursed.

At the start of October the World Bank committed \$143m to help Madagascar to computerise its identification requirements, in a country where a quarter of the population is estimated not to have an official identity. In October the African Bank for Development (ABD) provided a loan of \$27m over five years from 2021 to help to develop agriculture in the south-west, and in December it approved loans of \$43m to finance the second stage of the country's power transmission project. In December the World Bank provided \$50m to help infrastructure in the capital and \$33m to support growth projects.

The European Union committed a further €21m of budgetary support as well as €5m over four years for business incubation programmes.

In November the government of Madagascar and the World Bank appointed Bamboo Capital Partners, an impact investing platform, as the international fund manager for the Off-Grid Market Development Fund, a \$40 million renewable energy access fund intended to provide capital to firms financing projects.

Transport remains a challenge. In December the Minister of Territory and Public Works noted that nearly 90% of the country's roads were in poor condition, a proportion the government hoped to reduce to 70% by 2023.

Health

A report in *Le Monde Afrique* in October noted that there had been a substantial increase in clandestine abortions since the country's lock-down. Abortion is illegal in Madagascar, one of thirteen countries not to allow it even in cases of incest, rape and a threat to a mother's life.

The Global Handwashing Day on 15th October was the occasion to note that 77% of the Malagasy population do not have the means to wash with soap and that the lack of clean water was exemplified by 80% of primary schools not having access to drinking water.

The pollution in the capital Antananarivo appears to have deteriorated further. In November it was estimated to be twenty-five times worse than the levels seen as normal by the World Health Organisation, which has also estimated that a fifth of deaths in the country have been linked to poor air quality (including in houses). The Ministry of the Environment proposed a reduction in the tax rate for butane gas from 20% to 5% to encourage a switch from coal and charcoal.



*Wallpaper** magazine carried an article (in January) on the exhibition by the photographer Elena Heatherwick and the journalist Sally Williams, who had travelled over eighteen months to remote communities in Rwanda and Madagascar for *Toilet Stories*. The exhibition was in partnership with WaterAid and was supported by players of People's Postcode Lottery; the article is at https://www.wallpaper.com/art/photographer-elena-heatherwick-toilet-stories-wateraid#0_pic_8.

Agriculture

Rice production was reported to have amounted to 4,680,630 tonnes in 2020, usefully higher than the 3.2m tonnes in 2015 although the output of 2.4m tonnes of finished product compared to an estimated need for 2.78m tonnes - although imports were reported to have been only 45,000 tonnes. There has been an increase in productivity while the government has planned to expand the production area by 9,000 hectares to reach self-sufficiency by 2023.

In November Andry Rajoelina attended the opening of a flour mill at Toamasina with a daily capacity of 500 tonnes, using grain mostly from Russia; the country currently imports 250,000t of flour a year.

In December Le Monde carried an article on the lychee industry and the complications arising from previous monopolistic agreements:

https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2020/12/22/ce-monopole-m-empeche-de-travailler-a-madagascar-un-parfum-de-scandale-flotte-sur-les-litchis_6064161_3234.html.

The Malagasy government was reported in November to have set a minimum export price of \$250 per kilogram of vanilla. The industry specialists Aust & Hachmann suggested that \$175/kg would better suit the market given that the Madagascar vanilla crop would amount to some 1,800 tonnes, and that consumers might seek other sources.

Mongabay carried an article by Emilie Filou on November on the increasing prevalence of an insect-based diet focussing on the sakondry bug in north-east Madagascar and crickets in the capital; the link is <https://news.mongabay.com/2020/11/bug-bites-edible-insect-production-ramps-up-quickly-in-madagascar>.

Insecurity

The incidents of banditry, summary justice and kidnappings continued apace with the drought adding to insecurity. At end October the police killed five suspected *dahalo* or bandits at Ivandrika Farafangana.

Crime and punishment

In October all prisoners who had been ill with Covid-19 were said to have recovered and prison visits resumed. Amnesty International noted that there was still overcrowding in the country's prisons and called on the president to fulfil his promise to release a number of detainees.

There has been a worrying increase in sexual crimes against minors in Madagascar, with 1000 cases recorded for 2020 by November. The presidency proposed stricter sentences against paedophiles as well as for wider sexual crimes. In December the US Department of State announced that Marie Christina Kolo and her team won the 2020 Alumni Engagement Innovation Fund (AEIF) award for their project *Women Break the Silence*, which seeks to support victims of sexual violence.

Education

In part due to the pandemic, the number of pupils taking the baccalaureate declined from 174,822 in 2019 to 164,396 in 2020 while the pass rate also fell, from 52.4% to 46.8%.

The new term for the University of Antananarivo in November saw 26,000 students enrolled compared to a nominal capacity of 6,000 with the increase reflecting a series of interruptions including an eight-month Covid-related break. There are six public universities, dominated by that in the capital. The Minister of Higher Education, Elia Assoumacou, announced the opening of three new universities in the regions of Itasy, Vakinankaratra and Analanjirofo, with a further four planned for Melaky, Sava, Anosy and Sofia.

Tourism

The tourism sector has struggled. Although in October the first flights resumed to Nosy Be there were only an estimated 2,000 visitors over the first two months.

In the Indian Ocean section of the World Travel Awards Madagascar won as Leading Green Destination but lost out to Reunion for Nature, Mauritius for Adventure Tourism and for Honeymoon and to the Maldives for Beach, Dive and Leading Destination overall.

Minerals and mining

Production has remained suspended since April at Madagascar's Ambatovy nickel and cobalt mine, which had an impact on government income and the currency, although it was due to resume with a reported 263 people arriving in December from overseas to resume their roles. The Base Toliara ilmenite project also remained suspended as did the mining of chrome by Kraoma, while there was tension at Brieville over the mining activities of a rival APC Drilling, apparently under licence.

A London-listed graphite producer Tirupati Graphite said its Vatomina project in Madagascar was on track to be commissioned during the second quarter of 2021 with initial production capacity up to 6,000 tonnes per annum.

At the end of October BP renounced its rights to four offshore oil blocks where initial work had taken place, citing its decision to focus on renewable energy.

In November the Central Bank of Madagascar signed an agreement with sixteen operators to officialise the gold mining industry. The head of the customs agency estimated that the illegal export of gold had been worth some \$1bn; a UN agency had calculated that the United Arab Emirates had received 200 tonnes of the metal from Madagascar between 2006 and 2018.

Australia's Akora Resources launched a fund-raising in November to build an African iron ore business based initially on its Bekisopa project in Madagascar, in which it took a 75% stake in 2014.

Wildlife and conservation

Forests and protected areas

In October the Alliance Voahary Gasy (AVG) noted that there had been an increase in illegal logging. Madagascar eased a two-year-old restriction on the domestic sale of stockpiles of non-precious timber logged from natural forests. In November the Minister of the Environment said that all logging and exports of precious woods remained suspended.

Species

In October a report from researchers at the University of Innsbruck indicated that all of Madagascar's megafauna had disappeared after humans had arrived and it was likely that their arrival had compounded the impacts of climate change.

In November researchers re-discovered the Voeltzkow's chameleon (*Furcifer voeltzkowi*) in an untamed hotel garden in north-western Madagascar, after the species was apparently lost for more than 100 years. There is an article at <https://news.mongabay.com/2020/11/a-chameleon-not-seen-in-a-century-reappears-in-a-madagascar-garden/>.

In November an article in *Nature* described a newly-identified bird species that lived during the late Cretaceous age in what is now Madagascar. The bird *Falcatakely forsterae* belongs to the extinct Enantiornithines group alongside non-avian relatives such as Tyrannosaurus.



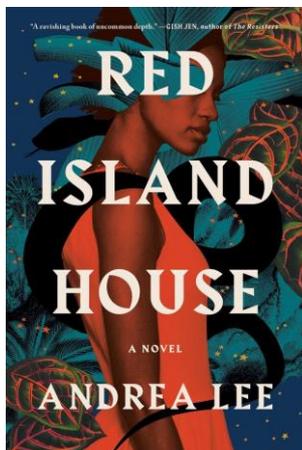
In December RBG Kew selected ten highlights from the 156 species it and its partners had named in 2020. This included what was termed the ugliest orchid in the world, *Gastrodia agnicellus*. There are details and pictures at <https://www.kew.org/about-us/press-media/ugliest-orchid-top-species-2020>. RBG Kew had also identified two new species of aloe, *Aloe vatovavensis* and *A. rakotonasoloi* in a forest rather than in the usual open areas.

Books

The long-awaited book by John Gimlette, a Society member, is now out and is called *The Gardens of Mars*. The book is a 'walk-through history', combining both travels and research. Ahead of newspaper reviews the explorer and writer Benedict Allen described it as: '*This is classic Gimlette - an utter delight. Here is the tale of an enchanted island, one enlivened by its spirited inhabitants and mysterious past. But what makes the book so readable is the author's unfailing eye for the quirky and unexpected. It's a wonderfully witty and wry book, the author's wanderings through Madagascar lit all along the way by his telling eye for detail and accustomed panache*'.

John has found a means to send signed copies out to people through Daunt Books and the link is at <https://dauntbooks.co.uk/shop/books/the-gardens-of-mars-madagascar-an-island-story/>.

John has also created an entertaining and enlightening introductory short video on YouTube to provide a mini-launch of the book, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mcaktn8K1fw>.



A new novel by Andrea Lee, to be published by Scribner in March (ISBN13: 9781982137809) travels from Italy to a beach in Madagascar. The *New Yorker* magazine, which published a chapter, had an interview with the author in December which provided a description of her background reading, including Naivo's contemporary novel *Beyond The Rice Fields*, the seventeenth-century *A General History of the Pyrates* and William S. Burroughs's 1991 novella set in Madagascar, *Ghost of Chance*.

Charities and NGOs

The Society has contributed £1,500 to Money for Madagascar (MfM) in support of its campaign helping to support communities in the south of Madagascar. MfM has launched an appeal for urgent help for starving children in the region, which you can support with a donation here: <https://moneyformadagascar.org/famine-appeal/>. The appeal reads:

Money for Madagascar is urgently appealing for help to respond to the humanitarian crisis developing in Southern Madagascar. 2020 has been a hard year for the whole world, but for families in southern Madagascar, the combination of relentless drought and COVID-19 have been particularly catastrophic. Three years of drought mean no crops have grown and water tables have dried up. COVID-19 restrictions have reduced incoming food supplies and sent prices sky rocketing. Although drought is common in the south, the current level of hunger is unprecedented. Mothers are reduced to preparing a mixture of clay and tamarind to fill their children's empty stomachs. Even the tamarinds are running out and the cacti, a staple at times of hunger, have long dried up.

Vulnerable families are beginning to see their loved ones starve to death. One village leader, Refanampy, is keeping the names of the dead in a notebook. "We're used to famine, but this time it's just too much," he says. "Before this, we didn't have people dying (of hunger) in our village."

According to Theodore Mbainaissem of The World Food Programme(WFP), the extent of the hunger has caught humanitarians and authorities by surprise and left residents with no more resources to face the crisis. "For now," he says, "the only solution is to aid them by bringing in enough food for the months to come."

The WFP has already begun to distribute food but they do not have resources to reach everyone in need. Although MfM is small we can make a big difference. Working with our partners on the ground we can reach isolated families in urgent need of emergency food and water. Your gift can save precious lives!

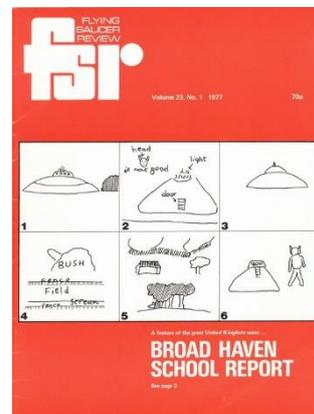
Thinking Huts, a US non-profit firm set up to build printed schools, is planning its first project for Madagascar. Maggie Grout, an undergraduate at Colorado University, founded the firm to provide cheap school buildings around the world and is aiming to raise \$350,000 from donors to fund the scheme. The proposed school will combine printed walls and a conventionally-built roof and will be housed on the campus of the University of Fianarantsoa; it would be the first such printed education facility in the world.

Look back...

As we enter the sixtieth year of the Anglo-Malagasy Society's existence, we take a look back at some highlights from our archives.

If reports are to be believed, extra-terrestrial beings took some interest in Madagascar during the 1950s and 1960s. On the evening of 16 August 1954, a mysterious large green ball was spotted moving through the sky across Antananarivo at a height of just 50–100m, apparently witnessed by a large number of people including several Air France employees. Sparks were said to be emanating from the rear of the craft and electromagnetic interference caused lights to go out in shops as it passed overhead.

A few years later, the *Flying Saucer Review* carried a report by a French Foreign Legion soldier of German origin, who was out on a reconnaissance exercise in Madagascar in May 1967, when he and several colleagues witnessed the rapid descent of a dazzling machine 'like a shining egg on the end of a piece of string... between seven and eight metres high'. He reports that all 23 of them were paralysed by the craft's presence 'but none of us perceived the lapse of time. When the machine departed, we all recovered the use of our limbs. We were all in exactly the same positions and the same places as we were when it landed. But when we checked up on the time... we realised that two and three-quarter hours had passed without our perceiving it'.



It was in light of these claims of alien activity that the October 1977 issue of the Anglo-Malagasy Society newsletter opened with the following paragraph:

A few years ago, UFOs were reported to have been seen over Madagascar. There have been no more in the period from March to September since the last letter was written, although during the last weekend in July a much more solid visitor from outer space literally 'dropped in' – not for a quiet chat, but with a bang which is said to have been heard over a radius of some hundreds of kilometres. A huge meteorite broke in two over the island. The two pieces fell in the Fianarantsoa and Ankazobe areas. The larger crater is reported to be about 240 yards across. That is not quite in the Arizona class, but still one of the largest known and one which, perhaps, might take its place alongside Tritriva as a tourist attraction. A local 'scientific mission' went to investigate, but no details are to hand yet.

A report of the incident in the *New York Times* of 31 July 1977, quoting Reuters, described an impact so dramatic that several windows were broken. By the time of the following Society newsletter in April 1978, however, the enigma had only deepened:

A meteorite led the news in the last letter. It was said to have broken in two; one piece making a cavity apparently second only to Arizona. The report was repeated in good faith, sponsored as it was by a reputable news agency and by 'the quality press'. No sooner was it reported than it became a mystery. There have been various explanations, ranging from some sort of hoax to a fall somewhere in such dense forest that 'no-one' could get there. A genuine meteorite of such a size would surely have aroused more scientific interest. However, a university visitor to Tananarive said he was sitting in a hotel at the time, saw a very bright flash and after a long interval heard a loud bang. Whatever really did happen, expectant tourists need not after all rush (yet) for front-line view.

ScienceNews carried the story, quoting the assistant director of the American Meteor Society as saying 'if the report is true, this would be one of the major, if not *the* major, meteorite events of this century. In a subsequent issue on 13 August 1977, a follow-up report began thus: 'The confused tale of the meteorite (or meteorites) that did (or did not) fall to the east (or south, or northeast, or northwest) of the capital city of Madagascar, possibly creating (or not creating) a crater (or craters) up to 240 metres across, is finally beginning to straighten itself out – or is it?'

To our knowledge, the matter never was conclusively resolved (despite a week-long search by seismologists and geologists with the aid of a Soviet-donated helicopter), confirming only that obtaining accurate information from Madagascar has always been fraught with difficulty!