



“A YEAR AT WIKO IS KIND OF LIKE
A YEAR IN THE FIELD”
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This end-of-the-year essay is inspired by a conversation I had one day with fellow anthropologist, fellow Africanist, and fellow Fellow Alice Bellagamba. Alice commented that a year at Wiko is kind of like a year in the field. I hadn't exactly thought of it that way before. Although it had occurred to me that I will remember 2011–12 with the same fondness as 1997–99, the 19 months I lived among Mikea hunter-gatherers in rural Madagascar collecting data for my doctoral dissertation. What both years have in common is the transformative effect they had on my life, imagination, and intellect.

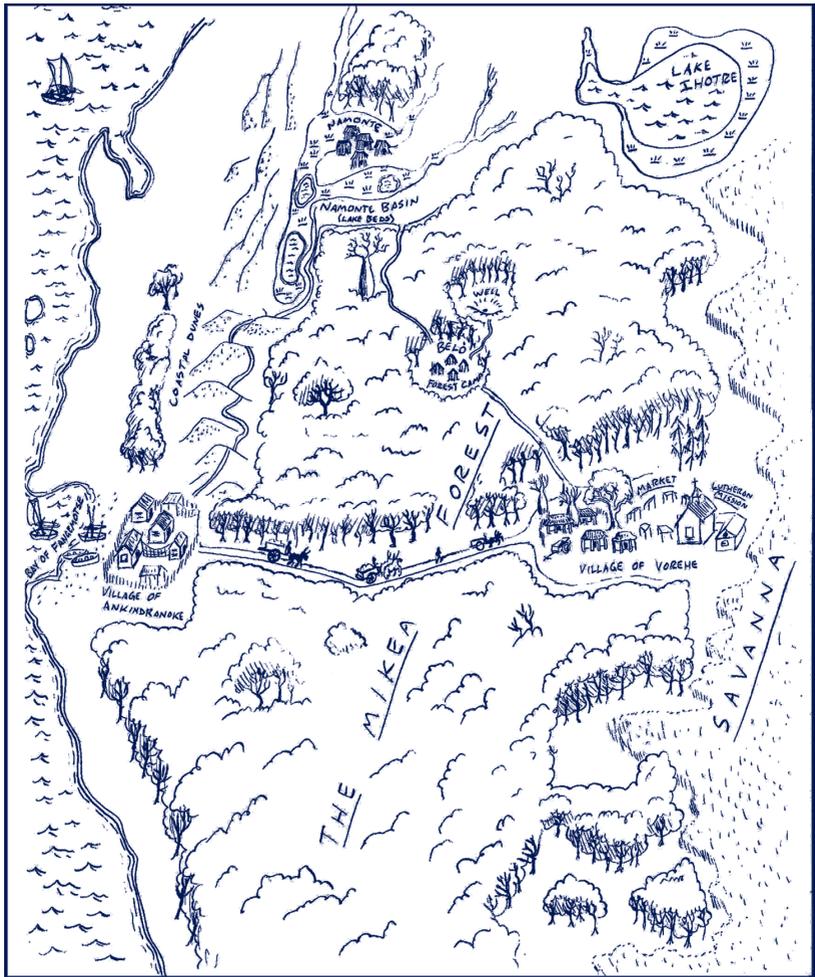
A year at Wiko *is* a lot like a year spent doing fieldwork. Both start with a period of linguistic and cultural adjustment, when even taking care of your basic biological and social needs poses challenges. This is followed by a phase of increasing linguistic and cultural competence, when things become easier, knowledge accumulates rapidly, and life is thrilling. There inevitably follows a period of lag, as it becomes increasingly clear that

life and learning still require a lot of work, that language skills may never really be good enough, and that it's impossible to accomplish as much as hoped. I write to you today, Monday, July 9, 2012, from the midst of the final phase, an emotional tug-of-war between eagerness to get back home to family, friends, colleagues, students, and so-called "real life" and remorse over the end of a fabulously rich experience.

I spent October 1997 living in the seaside city of Toliara, Madagascar, known locally as "the city of the sun". I lived with my collaborator Professor Tsiazonera in what constituted a middle-class home in that place and time – a rented cinderblock structure with three rooms, a few light bulbs dangling from a corrugated metal roof full of cobwebs, a single outdoor water tap, an outdoor kitchen where meals were prepared on a charcoal stove, and a toilet worse than the one from *Trainspotting*. Tsiazonera and his wife Louisette lived there with their three young daughters, plus two nieces and a nephew from the country who were attending school in the city, plus an ever-rotating cast of country visitors, plus dogs, chickens, ducks, pigs, and a tortoise, all in a space a little larger than the courtyard of Villa Walther. During the day the place was alive with the sounds of the radio, yelling children, barking dogs, ambulant vendors, beggars at the door and the smells of cooking. At night we slept chock-a-block in the limited indoor space, on beds, couches, chairs, and sheets of sponge on the concrete floor. This is where I learned to speak the Malagasy language. Tsiazonera and I went through sentences and grammar several times per day. I would copy and recopy my notes. Then I would practice what I'd learned on family, friends, neighbors, and vendors. I should probably mention that English was useless in this context. I had to translate Malagasy lessons through my hazy command of French, which, at the time, I spoke with a Mexican accent due to having participated in a study abroad in Meridá two years earlier.

September 2011, my first month in Berlin, was of course much more comfortable, with a nice apartment in the top floor of Villa Walther. But it posed some similar challenges. For the first three weeks, I struggled through intensive German language lessons (which I eventually dropped), while on the street I learned to decipher menus, public transit, manners, rules, protocols, and landscapes (what is a *Schrebergarten*? I asked Franz Alto one day). I remember that after the first week in Berlin I had the semblance of a routine, yet I still lacked some basic knowledge, such as how to dispose of household rubbish. October 1st brought another wave of adjustments, with the beginning of the lunches, dinners, and colloquia, plus new names, faces, rules, guidelines, manners, and protocols to learn (such as: do I preferentially sit next to people with whom I have had great conversations in the

past, or with those I have not met yet? If I have a great conversation with Fellow X one day and don't sit by him again for a week, will he take offense?).



III. 1: Map of Mikea Forest

By March 1998, five months into field research in the Mikea Forest, I had become accustomed to my surroundings, comfortable with thinking in French and speaking Malagasy, and integrated into the local kinship structure. As they say in southwestern Madagascar, I had become *zatsse* (adapted). Working alternately with Tsiazonera and another collaborator from the Université de Toliara, Jaovola Tombo, we spent half our time in the small forest camp of Belò and half our time traveling among three other field sites.

Belò became home. It still is (or was, last time I was there in 2008). In 1998 Belò consisted of seven bark-thatched huts with roofs too low to stand up in, on a carpet of red sand peppered with dried goat droppings, surrounded by a mosaic of dry deciduous forest and clearings for swidden maize cultivation. One of the seven huts was ours. We made the mistake of using baobab bark for wall thatch. At night we could hear the resident herd of goats chewing through the walls. Cooking was done over a campfire. The nearest water source was a natural sinkhole well with water the color of apple cider, located two kilometers away in the forest. We visited the well on alternating days, where we enjoyed our only chance to bathe and filled 30 L jerry cans that we hauled back to camp for cooking and drinking.

To get from Belò to the other fieldsites required a journey on foot with our baggage either strapped to our backs or in a rented oxcart. It took about four hours to hike the 15 km from the large market town of Vorehe on the edge of the savanna to the forest camp of Belò. It was another four-hour hike, through some amazing old growth forest and past a truly impressive baobab tree, to reach the lakeside villages of the Namonte Basin, where Mikea live in comfortable reed-thatched houses on clean, white sand. The next 10 km leg of our circuit we typically did at night. It took us across tall dunes of yellow, red, and white sand that would have been blinding and hot during the day. Around 10 or 11 p.m. we would bed down in the soft sand at the summit of the final dune before the coast. Then in the morning we would stumble down to the bayside village of Ankindranoke for a breakfast of coffee and fried fish. The final leg of our journey was the hardest, but often the most enjoyable. It involved a 37-km walk from Ankindranoke back to Vorehe, through the heart of the Mikea Forest. We travelled through the night with our baggage in an oxcart, at a slow pace due to the sandy soil. If it happened to be the night before market, the sandy road was a very social highway full of peddlers carrying smoked fish, dried octopus, and live crabs from the coast.

To be *zatsse* in this life meant adapting to some serious social and physical challenges. I've already described the physical challenges – long hikes, hauling baggage and jerry

cans, and constant outdoor living. Socially, I learned the names and faces of a large number of people. I learned who was interested in us because they genuinely liked us and who simply wanted to profit from our presence. I became incorporated into kinship networks. At Belò I was adopted by Solo and Zariana, whom I still address as *baba* (father) and *rene* (mother), and who refer to me as their white child (*anake vazaha*). At Ankindranoke I had a more complicated situation, with father Jisy and mother Nety competing for my attention with Jisy's younger sister Fanagnane, who became my sister, too. And there were countless other brothers and sisters, including a cadre of children that I "grew up with" and who are now adults and valuable friends.

To be *zatsé* at Wiko was a remarkably similar process. There is the building of kinship ties. For example, one cold Saturday morning in February I boarded a cab with Thomas and Clara Christensen, Mark Viney, David Tricker, and Christa Eßbach. We were on our way to the beautiful synagogue on Oranienburger Straße, to attend the *bat mitzvah* of Susannah Heschel and Jim Aronson's daughter Gittel. The cab ride over was a bonding experience, as we discussed our previous experience with Jewish ritual (and for some of us, lack thereof). Then we were at the synagogue, along with many of the other Fellows, sharing in a personal family experience, watching Fellows like Jeremy Adler and Israel Yuval read Hebrew texts, and watching two very happy parents beaming with pride (I think Gittel was happy, too). Thursday night dinners were similar kinship-building ceremonies, from the drinks beforehand, to the brotherhood and sisterhood of the late night crew that stayed to ensure that no half-emptied wine bottles were wasted, to the walk home to Villa Walther where the inhabitants of our village dwelt behind the lighted windows. The village-like feeling of Villa Walther was amplified when the weather warmed in spring, as the Wiko children began to spend more time outside and, with their new-found knowledge of the German language, learned to play together and eventually formed rowdy gangs. As I would do in a rural village in Madagascar, I found myself feeling responsible for Fellows' kids and would lend a co-parental hand when necessary (indeed, the day after the *bat mitzvah* I went with Alex Courtiol and his two sons Eelis and Aatos to Legoland Berlin).

In both Madagascar 1998 and Berlin 2012 I learned things I never expected to learn and never even knew I was interested in learning. My main objective in Madagascar was to collect quantitative economic data, such as foraging returns, agricultural yields, labor allocations, and market prices. My goals in Berlin were similarly limited: to do some data analyses and write some papers. But in Madagascar I became increasingly fascinated by

clan politics, astrological calendars, witchcraft accusations, oral histories, and wizardlore. I learned that the village of Vorehe was named for evil magic (*vorike*), which was supposedly practiced by one of its founders. I enjoyed the tales of the great wizard Tsiasinda from Namonte, who both assisted the French colonial forces by collecting their taxes and used his magic to protect Mikea people from the colonial regime by hiding the village of Namonte whenever colonial agents wanted to cause them harm. In Germany this year, I learned to read Berlin's post-Prussian, post-Empire, post-Weimar Republic, post-Third Reich, post-Cold War historical landscape. In the spring I played tour guide for several waves of visitors from the United States and Madagascar. I showed my guests many a Schloss on the Havel River, built by various Königs, Kaisers, and Kurfürsts of the Hohenzollern clan, most of who seem to have been named Friedrich or Wilhelm. We visited the haunting memorial to the Jewish people exported from Berlin to concentration camps from platform 17 of the Grunewald Station. And I've read every plaque and seen each film at the fascinating outdoor Wall Museum along Bernauer Straße several times over. My favorite place to take visitors was the Deutsche Historische Museum on Unter den Linden.

Of course I also gained new knowledge from my fellow Fellows. In particular I learned that whatever you think you know about other fields of study is probably wrong. It turns out that Jews borrowed ritual from Christians, the Dark Ages weren't that dark, parasites may be good for you, slaves have agency, birdsong is music, the backs of icons are just as meaningful as the fronts, Lemberg (Lviv) was once the center of the intellectual world, and genes are often less important than growth and development (okay, I knew that last one already). I learned that malaria plasmodia have sperm, the Ottoman Bank created a linguistically and ethnically diverse bourgeois class, music doesn't inevitably evolve to greater tonality, hieroglyphs helped Egyptians to remember things, and of course that deceased saints may periodically emit an icky (yet holy) goo called *myron*.

And then, alas, in both fieldwork and sabbatical, one inevitably enters a phase of lag. I wish to describe this phase rather briefly, both because this essay is getting rather long, and because this part is decidedly less fun to talk about. I think it should be acknowledged, though, for it would be dishonest to portray my first year in Madagascar and this previous year in Berlin as all smiles and happiness. Around September 1998 many people in the village of Vorehe decided that I was being too generous with the people in the forest and not generous enough with them. I had to deal with beggars of many sorts, from poor and sick people in genuine destitution to relatively successful peasants who just wanted

their share of my supposed wealth to a new tax on resident researchers invented by the town council (*fokon'olo*). One day I had to deal with five beggars before I could even drink my morning coffee. The more I gave to any one person, the more everyone else thought they were owed.

I'm happy to report that there was very little jealousy and witchcraft at Wiko – indeed, none that I was privy to. My Wiko lag took a different form, in the month of April, when I simultaneously realized that my remaining time was limited, that I had started more projects than I had finished, and that I had four consecutive waves of guests (family, friends) to entertain. I thoroughly enjoyed all my guests, but the time commitment posed a challenge to productivity.

And now here we are with just a few days left in this Wiko paradise. Our goodbyes here at Wiko have taken many forms, but most memorable will probably be the party we threw for the staff. There is an obvious parallel with my last day at Belò. We threw a huge party. We slaughtered a goat and a turkey and cooked a mountain of rice. We played loud music and drank too much rum and danced until morning.

Meanwhile, in the village of Vorehe, one of our best friends, Mr. Tantely, was dying. Tantely had been an honest friend and a fantastic informant, and he was the father of our constant companion Veve, who drove our oxcart. Tantely died on my very last day of fieldwork in 1999; I had neither time nor money to attend the funeral. Many goodbyes went unsaid (my next trip would be four years later, in 2003).

I've presented two narratives here, one about Madagascar and one about Berlin. The two stories converged on April 2012, when Wiko very generously invited Tsiazonera and Jaovola to spend ten days in Berlin (I should mention that the three of us have continued working together in Madagascar since my dissertation fieldwork, and we're planning another project for the near future). Tsiazonera and Jaovola introduced my *Dienstagskolloquium*, and then on *Donnerstag* I introduced their presentations to a full audience at Wiko. In the meantime, the three of us worked very hard and laughed a lot. We laughed about their observations as Africans visiting Berlin and about old times.



III. 2: Berlin Mitte

I have tried to format this essay as an adventure tale. Not for reasons of glamour or entertainment, but because adventure is the reason I love anthropology, and thus the reason why I am a scholar. What this year at Wiko has been about for me is getting myself unstuck from the rut of producing academic papers simply for the sake of promotion and tenure and resetting my attention on fieldwork and the adventure of learning new things about the world. So I spent much of the year on my couch in the basement of Villa Jaffé, reading and thinking, or scribbling on the dry erase board. I think I have some exciting ideas for the next field project in Madagascar. I would like to test whether and how increasing involvement in cash exchanges influences sociality and trust and whether these changes influence mental health and how people perceive the world. Tsiazonera and Jaovola are as excited as I am about the idea of extending our research area to the mountains, forests, and drylands of Bara cattle herders, east of the Mikea Forest. So while I did not complete

all the tasks I had planned to finish, I did accomplish this one thing. I have rekindled my appetite for fieldwork, and for this reason I consider my time at Wiko to be a success.

A year at Wiko is a lot like a year spent in the field. Both transform you as a person. I am delighted that both Madagascar and Berlin will always be a part of my life, and that my family extends both to African hunter-gatherers and scholars from throughout the world.