

# FORGOTTEN ISLAND

Based on actual missionary experiences

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Serving in southern Africa under Baptist World Mission since 1992

NOTE: The story line, although fictional, is a stitching together of real events. For example, it was a Southern Baptist missionary whose single tract led to the establishment of numerous churches in southeastern Madagascar in the 1990s. Keith Brennan (Kevin Brosnan) and Errol Green's (Eric Graham) survey trip was for a few days only, whereas this story presents it as a missionary journey. The "plunge of Death" segment is a factual account taken from *The Martyr Church: A Narrative of the Introduction, Progress, and Triumph of Christianity in Madagascar*, by William Ellis, published by John Snow & Co., 1870. The details of the recovery of the passports are also true, as related by another missionary. The names and places in the story are difficult, but they are in every case either actual historical figures or authentic Malagasy names.

## OVERVIEW OF SEGMENTS:

- SEGMENT ONE – The Plunge of Death. This is the account of the martyrdom of Christians under Queen Ranavalona I, in February, 1849.
- SEGMENT TWO – One Tract, Many Churches. This is the account of how one tract resulted in the establishment of many churches in southeastern Madagascar.
- SEGMENT THREE – Cries from the Grave. Christianity comes into conflict with the heathen practice of twin-killing.
- SEGMENT FOUR – Grandpa's Bones. Christianity comes into conflict with the heathen practice of the "turning of the bones."

## SEGMENT ONE – THE PLUNGE OF DEATH

Although it is the fourth largest island in the world and home to many unique species of flora and fauna, few people know anything about Madagascar, a secluded nation of nineteen million souls, which lies several hundred miles off the coast of Mozambique in the Indian Ocean. The island has been known more as a pirates' haven than as a beacon of Christianity. Yet, there were once many Christians in Madagascar. Missionaries of the London Missionary Society arrived at the beginning of the nineteenth century and established themselves in the central highlands of Madagascar, the seat of power on the island and the current location of its capital. They saw many conversions among the Malagasy people and established churches and schools. However, by the mid-nineteenth century, severe persecution and martyrdom had all but stamped out the open practice of Christianity in Madagascar. So pervasive had been the growth of Christianity, that Queen Ranaivalona I, argued in 1849, that she had to persecute the Christians to prevent the entire island from converting to Christianity. More than 150 years later missionaries Keith Brennan and Errol Green took the gospel back to Madagascar. This is the account of what they found.

Rainitraho was only eight years old, but he knew he would never forget the horrible sights and sounds coming from the base of the cliff in front of him. He was frozen in place, hiding under cover of the tall grass and shrubs. He dared not move or make any sound which might attract the attention of the soldiers. Today, like so many days before, Rainitraho had come to this field to hunt for lizards. But, the mob's rapid approach entrapped him. Before him were many soldiers, 1,903 Christian prisoners, and many on-lookers.

The examining officer questioned the prisoners:

“Do you worship the sun, the moon or the earth?” One of the Christians replied: “I do not pray to them, because the hand of God made them.” “Do you worship the twelve sacred mountains?” “I do not worship them, because they are only mountains.” “Do you pray to the idols which preside over the consecration of kings?” “I do not pray to them, because the hand of man made them.” “Do you pray to the ancestors of the rulers?” “Kings and governors are given to us by God so that we obey them and pay them homage, but they are only men like us. When we pray, it is God alone whom we address.” “Do you distinguish other days and do you observe the sabbath?” “It is the day of the great God, for in six days the Lord made all his works, then he rested on the seventh day and declared that day holy. That is why we rest and keep that day holy.” (Bruno Chenu, *The Book of Christian Martyrs*, p. 148.)

“You obstinate traitors shall fall under the wrath of the queen! I will now read the queen's edict,” declared the prosecutor.

Rainitraho could clearly hear the reading of the edict. “I, the queen of Madagascar, say that no religion whatever, excepting that of Andrianampoinimerina and Radama, and the customs of your ancestors, shall be ever introduced and practiced in this my country: anything else is totally rejected by me.” The queen also declared that the spirits of Andrianampoinimerina and Radama had revealed to her the proper punishments for the Christians. Most of them would be fined or whipped, but the leaders would receive more severe punishments. Some were sent into life-long slavery under hard labor. Fourteen would be hurled off the cliff to their deaths and four were sentenced to be burned alive. The four begged their executioner to kill them before burning their bodies, but to no avail. These four prayed and sang a hymn

until the flames consumed their flesh and sent their souls soaring to their heavenly Father. The other fourteen condemned Christians were bound hand and foot and taken to the edge of the precipice, where they were hurled or rolled off in a plunge of death. Rainitraho cringed at the sight of their bodies falling one by one before him.

Suddenly, there was an eerie silence until Rainitraho heard a familiar voice. “No, not Ranivo. They can’t kill her,” Rainitraho thought. Everyone knew and loved Ranivo. She was the beautiful, young, and talented daughter of a prominent family in Anlakely. Had she also confessed Christ? Her family pleaded with her to recant. The executioner held her back until the end, hoping the gruesome sight would convince her to once again worship the idols of Madagascar. But, the faith of these martyrs, her brothers and sisters in Christ, only served to strengthen her own resolve to remain faithful, even unto death. She begged that she might be allowed to follow her friends in martyrdom, for she could not take the oath to idols of wood and stone. At this the executioner struck her on the face and returned her to her parents, declaring, “she is insane.” How thankful Rainitraho was that her life had been spared!

“Rainitraho, the boy in the field, was my great-grandfather. He told me all these things when I was a young child and he wanted me to become a Christian. But, I feared the idols and spirits of my ancestors more than the strange stories of an old man,” related pastor Ramonja. Keith Brennan, Errol Green, and pastor Ramonja, stood on the hallowed ground, at the base of the cliff, now known as martyrs’ hill. They reverently meditated upon the scene which had taken place in that very spot over 150 years ago and thanked the Lord for the religious freedom that the Malagasy people now enjoy. But, they did not understand the spiritual darkness and oppression which still pervades Madagascar. Little did they know how much their own faith would be tested as their missionary journey into the interior would bring them into conflict with such repulsive practices as twin killing and the turning of the bones.

## SEGMENT TWO – ONE TRACT, MANY CHURCHES

Keith Brennan and Errol Green were anxious to travel to the low-lying southeastern district of Fianarantsoa, where pastor Ramonja's church is located. The arduous journey from the capital, Antananarivo, in the central highlands, to the southeastern coastal area required all the attention and skills of an experienced driver. None of the roads were paved and the main roads were challenging, even with a four-wheel drive vehicle. They nearly rolled over a couple times as they were forced to drive up embankments to avoid the deep craters in the road. They held their breath on several occasions as they edged their way around sheer mountain cliffs with a wall on one side and their tires just inches from a sheer drop-off on the other side. They could only imagine how beautiful the island must have appeared before it was de-forested. The main feature of the naked-looking terrain was the red tint of the soil. They now understood why Madagascar is called the red island.

It was during this several-day journey that pastor Ramonja shared the marvelous account of how the churches were established along the Mananara River in his home district of Fianarantsoa.

In 1992, the Lord burdened an American missionary to take a survey trip into this remote region of Madagascar. He returned a month later to Antananarivo, disillusioned, for his journey was strewn with hardships and discouragements. He suffered many days with violent illness and fevers. He was unable to penetrate a single heart with the light of Gospel truth. All he saw was rampant paganism, gross idolatry, abhorrent superstitious practices, and heart-wrenching poverty. He spent several days of his journey at an inn near our village, where he suffered the worst of his illnesses.

I was a recently-married young man at the time and worked for the proprietor of the inn. It was my job to clean and prepare the rooms. I never met or spoke to the American, but it was my duty to prepare his room for our next guest. While going about my duties, I noticed an attractive piece of literature on the night stand. I was happy to find that it was written in Malagasy. Although I didn't know it at the time, this was a Gospel tract. I was fascinated by the message of the pamphlet. I read and re-read it until it was soiled and the corners were all frayed. It became my prized possession. Each time I read the tract, its truth penetrated my heart ever deeper.

I found myself at odds with the core beliefs of my society and family. I no longer trusted the divine utterances of the ombiasy (soothsayer or witch-doctor). For the first time, I saw our idols for what they are, carved pieces of wood and stone, the works of men's hands. I was released from my fear of spirits and particularly, the spirits of my ancestors. A heart of faith replaced my religion of fear as I trusted Jesus Christ as my personal Savior. I was born-again. My wife also received Christ and we began to witness to everyone in our village. Some believed while others opposed us.

My father, the chief of several villages, found himself in a precarious position. Many were calling for my banishment while others were encouraging him to also

become a Christian. I was called before the ombiasy to defend the Christian faith. He told my father to banish me lest the wrath of our ancestors and local gods bring unspeakable plagues and diseases upon our villages. I knew nothing of the Bible and was no match for the crafty manipulations of the ombiasy. My father no doubt would have taken the ombiasy's advice were it not for the fact that I am his beloved son and my wife was expecting his first grandchild. He rather commanded me to write to the American missionary and beg him to return to our village. If the missionary's book was found to truly contain the words of the supreme God, then my father promised that he also would become a Christian. But, if the ombiasy's arguments and power prevailed, then I and my family would be banished forever.

We will never forget that fateful day when the missionary stood face to face with the object of our fears, the head ombiasy, whom we believed had the power over life and death, health and disease, fertility and barrenness. The ombiasy's face was hard and grim, his words loud and harsh, his manner argumentative and demeaning. This was contrasted with the sweet disposition and kindly mannerisms of the missionary, who answered every assertion or accusation with the very words of Scripture. One by one the pillars of our pagan religion were obliterated under the weight of Scripture light. The missionary appeared to be but a simple messenger, whose power rested in the truth of a self-evident, divine message. The ombiasy, on the other hand, resorted to all means of rhetoric, accusations, threats, and physical contortions to mask the emptiness of his arguments. Not only was my father convinced of the deity of Christ and the impotence of idols and ancestors, but indeed, the Spirit of God did His convicting work in the hearts of nearly everyone present that day. Almost the entire village confessed Christ as Savior and a church was instantly planted. That was the first day I sensed God calling me to preach His Word. My father's influence and the missionary's message were a powerful combination in advancing the Gospel to many of the villages in the Fianarantsoa district. Within ten years more than twenty vibrant churches were established along the banks of the Mananara River.

Keith and Errol were enthralled by pastor Ramonja's testimony and were anxious to resume their journey to visit these churches. Pastor Ramonja had just concluded his story during lunch at a road-side café near the town of Ambalavao. But as the trio returned to their vehicle, they were greeted by an unwelcome sight. One of the windows was broken out and as they feared, one of their bags was missing. "Why did it have to be the most important bag, containing our passports," Keith and Errol mused. How could they possibly continue their journey without their passports? They both realized that this development would not only end their journey to the Mananara River churches, but would likely put a premature end to their stay in Madagascar.

### SEGMENT THREE – CRIES FROM THE GRAVE

Keith Brennan, Errol Green, and pastor Ramonja made their way to the local police station to report the theft of the two passports. While completing the paper work, they heard what sounded like thuds followed by moans. “What is that?” the Americans questioned. The captain unashamedly stated that those sounds were coming from the interrogation room. “We are in the process of obtaining a confession from a local criminal,” he replied. He then called two police officers to the office and commanded them not to return without the passports and the culprit who stole them.

The three men were summoned back to the police station just before dusk. There stood the two officers with the man who confessed to stealing the passports. His condition suggested that his confession had not been completely voluntary. During the ensuing questioning, the man repeatedly claimed that the passports had been destroyed and could not possibly be recovered. While glancing toward the interrogation room, the captain retorted that if the man could not produce the passports, it would be a most regrettable situation for him. “I can take you to the passports, but I cannot recover them” the man insisted. At this statement the captain instructed the thief to take them to the spot, which he did.

“What is this?” the captain angrily enquired. “This is where I threw the passports,” the thief answered. “Then, this is where you will find the passports,” the captain commanded. The missionaries watched in horror as the officers tied the feet of the pleading thief with a long rope. The captain, unmoved by the man’s appeals, instructed that he would not be pulled out without the passports in hand. The officers then lowered the man through the small hole in the seat of the community outhouse. The stench was overbearing for the missionaries, who stood back some distance. The police continued lowering the rope until it was slack. The man screamed and begged, but the only reply was, “do you have both passports yet?” Finally, the thief yelled with assurance that he indeed had found both passports. However, he was not pulled out of the stinking muck until he handed the passports to the outstretched arm of one of the police officers. The captain commanded the officer to wash the documents and return them to the missionaries. Only then did he give the order to retrieve the thief from the outhouse pit. The passports, although in remarkably good condition, considering where they had been, were kept in plastic bags from that time.

As the missionary trio resumed their journey, pastor Ramonja began to describe the areas through which they were about to travel. “Before reaching the Mananara River we will first pass through a series of towns and villages which we call the dark place. This is an area steeped in the ancient traditions and as yet, completely untouched with the Gospel of Christ. In fact, we do not know of a single Christian in that region. The ombiasies are very powerful and exercise complete control over the people. We must be careful.”

Ihosy was just such a place and it was the town where the three men stopped for the night. The local chief gave the men permission to set up their tents adjacent to the village cemetery, but was surprised at their willingness to do so. He wondered at the strange men who demonstrated no fear to sleep in the abode of spirits. No local would venture there at night and would certainly be deathly afraid to sleep in such a place. The three Christian men, not fearing spirits, felt it was a testimony of their faith to make camp next to the grave yard.

The men hastily set up their tents, ate supper, and retired for the night. With the setting of the sun, the activities and sounds of the village also began to diminish. The barking of dogs, crying of children, and crackling of cooking fires all receded into complete silence. Lying on his air mattress and nearly asleep, Keith could now hear the chorus of night-time insects and something else - a faint, very faint, almost undetectable sound. He pondered what it could be. It was a queer, eerie sound unlike any other. It made the hair stand up on the back of his neck and jolted him into complete alertness. Perhaps it was all in his head. No, it is real. But, what is it and where is it coming from? He cupped his hands around his ears, but still he could not discern the sound.

“Pastor Ramonja, Errol, come quickly!” Keith called with a tone of alarm. “Listen, do you hear it?” Keith asked. “Insects,” Errol responded, a little perturbed at being awakened from a sound sleep. “I would have thought you would be used to them by now.” But, both men noticed an expression of growing alarm on pastor Ramonja’s face. He motioned for the men to be absolutely silent as he concentrated on the faint, but familiar sound.

“Come, we must act before it is too late!” With these words pastor Ramonja ran out into the cemetery toward a freshly covered grave site. The two bewildered missionaries followed their friend toward a fresh pile of leaves and twigs to discover the horror of cries coming from the grave. Beneath the pile they uncovered a new-born babe inside a cloth bag. Pastor Ramonja whispered, “Thank God the babe is still alive.” “We must report this to the police immediately,” Errol shouted. “Who could do such a thing?” Keith questioned. The revolting nature of this heinous act made both men feel ill.

Errol took the infant in his arms and started toward the village with Keith. “No, stop!” demanded pastor Ramonja. “The child will die and perhaps you as well. This is not an isolated criminal act, but a religious observance of the community. You see, this child is no doubt a twin. Our tradition teaches that one twin is an evil spirit. At birth, the ombiasy divines which of the two is the evil spirit. The child is either thrown into the river or buried alive. We must hide this child until we arrive at the churches along the Mananara River. Only there will he be safe. One of the Christian women will adopt him as her own. Quickly, repair the gravesite. We must leave this place before morning.”

Keith wondered how the men could conceal a crying baby and what would happen if they were discovered.

#### SEGMENT FOUR – GRANDPA’S BONES

The three men were able to escape Ihosy undetected, but they knew the baby’s life depended on them reaching the Mananara River as soon as possible, where the child could receive proper nutrition and care. “We still have two full days journey before we reach the first church,” commented pastor Ramonja. “Wait, I see a shorter route if we get off the main road,” replied Errol, who was studying the map. Pastor Ramonja responded, “Yes, there is a much shorter route, but ...” “But what?” asked Keith. “Those people are dangerous and the road is treacherous, perhaps impassible. If it rains we could be stuck for days. One mistake at the wheel could be the death of us all. Outsiders never travel that route,” warned pastor Ramonja. “It may be a matter of life and death for the baby,” Keith suggested. Pastor Ramonja replied, “Yes, and it may also be a matter of life and death for us! But, with the blessing of the God of miracles, we could be in my home village by this evening.” “But look at the cloudy sky,” Errol warned. “And, you know that it has rained every second or third day since we arrived in Madagascar,” Errol added. After a round of prayer the men all agreed to take the shorter route for the sake of the baby’s life.

It seemed the road deteriorated with every passing mile. The thick, jungle vegetation masked the severity of the steep cliffs and ravines through which they were navigating. With the successful fording of each stream they thanked God for withholding the rains. They could see distant storms passing on either side of them, but not a drop of water dampened their windshield. At times, the road was so steep that they continued to slide down even with the brake fully engaged. Drops of perspiration were beading on Keith’s forehead, an evidence of the extreme concentration required behind the wheel. The group was treated to the sighting of a lemur, one of the indigenous species of monkey in Madagascar. They passed through several small villages without stopping.

About mid-day and half-way to their destination, they were abruptly stopped by a human road block. They had just arrived at one of the larger villages and it seemed that some type of festival was taking place. There was no possibility of progressing, so the men used the opportunity to exit the vehicle and eat lunch. But, Keith and Errol gagged on their food when they actually saw the focus of the celebration. The center of attention was a corpse! At first, the men assumed it was a funeral procession until they got a good look at the corpse. This person had been dead for many years! It was a grotesque sight. The spectacle was further compounded by the odd combination of extreme corruption adorned in fine attire fit for royalty.

“Here is our idol. See, it still abides in the place of prominence. Here is your home. See, we have not forgotten you.” The ombiasy directed these remarks to the corpse, but in the hearing of everyone.

“What is this?” the missionaries asked pastor Ramonja. “It is the turning of the bones. This is the Malagasy way of honoring the ancestors and securing their blessing. Each year a prominent ancestor is dug up, adorned in the most expensive apparel, and shown that the ancient ways have not been abandoned.”

What a contrast between this repulsive sight and the scene at pastor Ramonja's home village later that evening. Upon arrival, the men first offered a prayer of thanksgiving for their safe arrival at the Mananara River. Pastor Ramonja was so happy to be reunited with his wife and children. A young couple in their church, who had recently lost a three-month old babe to disease, adopted the new-born infant and gave him a Malagasy name meaning "the one who replaces the sorrow."

Keith and Errol spent several weeks preaching in the churches along the Mananara River. The difference was so stark that they hardly felt they were in Madagascar. The transformation in these people demonstrated that the sacrifices of missionaries and even martyrdom are a price worth paying for the spread of the Gospel.

Before returning to South Africa, Keith Brennan and Errol Green met with a high-ranking government official in Antananarivo, to discuss missionary work in Madagascar. He stated, "Well, you surely know that our new president, Marc Ravalomanana, is an evangelical Christian. We now have Bible studies in the parliament building. Missionaries were not allowed in Madagascar under the Marxist government of the past, but they are now welcome. Our people need what you have to offer."

"This is a forgotten island," Keith later thought. We have before us a great open door, yet there has not been since the time of Christ to this present day, an independent Baptist missionary in Madagascar. The twin-killing and turning of the bones must stop. The grip of the ombiasies must be broken. The one true God must replace these idols of wood and stone. Keith Brennan immediately began praying in earnest and publicizing the great need and open door to Madagascar. The year was 2002. The first independent Baptist missionary couple arrived in Madagascar in 2006, and several other couples are soon to follow in their wake. Who else will respond to this open door and come to this difficult, virgin, mission field?