

heartbeat a publication of AFRICA INLAND MISSION

AFRICA

PHOTOGRAPH // MARK ECKHOFF

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JOURNEY IN

Well, here we go again...

When you serve in Africa for 45 years, chances are you'll find yourself stuck in the mud from time to time. Ask Ray and Jill Davis, whose long ministry career has taken them from Kenya's bush, to teaching in college classrooms, to the remote hills of South Sudan. *Ray and Jill share their story beginning on page 26.* If there's been one upside to getting stuck so often, it's this, says Ray: "We tend to take more photos when we're stuck in the mud."

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From the outset of their missionary career, the Hofmann family wanted to serve in a place where no missionaries had ever been. And deep in a forest village on the island nation of Madagascar, God had just the place.

Light in the
**FOREST
 DEEP**

REACHING THE TANALA
 PEOPLE OF MADAGASCAR



When we arrived

on Madagascar in 2015 we did not have a specific people group to go to. We were stationed in the capital as part of an AIM team serving there, and our AIM teammates were more than willing to help us to get accustomed to life on Madagascar.

From the beginning of our journey with AIM we expressed our desire to serve in a new place. A place where no other missionaries yet worked. A colleague Rodrigo Petrelli had made several surveys across Madagascar and he gladly shared his findings with us. Where to begin? So many places and so many unreached. In the end we decided to take a closer look at the Tanala people. The Tanala, meaning people of the forest, are considered to be among the least-reached peoples on Madagascar. Living in a Tanala village would be challenging, but also beautiful. The people, we were told, were very friendly and open to the gospel.

Together with other AIM personnel and two Malagasy missionaries, we visited the Tanala in the beginning of 2016. The Tanala live mainly in two groups in the southwest of Madagascar. The first group lives in the thick rainforests and the other group lives at the edge of the rainforest. It was the dry season and thus, the best time to go. The first location was the Ikongo area. Reachable from the main road by a

BY JURGEN HOFMANN



bad 55 mile mud road. To classify this road as 'bad' is even an understatement, it was horrible and it took us seven hours. (Remember: It was the dry season!) The second location was the Sandrohy area. The mud road towards this place was a bit better and shorter, only nine miles, which took us about an hour. In both areas we visited some smaller villages and talked with the 'mpanjaka' (kings).

Melias and Thadee, two young Malagasy missionaries, were trained by AIM and eager to go. Melias did the talking and translating. It turned out to be God's timing. The kings told us that they had vaguely heard about the gospel but they did not understand it. Apparently a preacher came once a year and preached but never explained. They said that the preaching was done in a kind of Malagasy dialect they didn't understand. Probably the preacher used the official Malagasy language, which is referred to by the Tanala as the language of the Merina tribe. During our visits the kings asked all kinds of questions. "Are you Muslims? No? That's good!", "Are you planning to

change our traditions?" and more of these direct questions. Finally, one king told us they were afraid of me being tall and white! They all remembered that in the past the white people did not respect their traditions and wanted them to learn the "wrong Malagasy language." It took us a while to discover what they were referring to. It dawned on us that they were thinking about the French occupation, which ended in 1960. The 'wrong Malagasy language' was the French language. No worries, I could assure them. I am not planning to use that language as I and my family do not even speak it. When I told them that we are like little children who need to learn their language and culture, they burst out in laughter. The big foreigner who needed to be taught as a baby?! The king promised that they would help us. They concluded that, if the news about Jesus is really good, we should come quickly to teach them!

This was in 2016. Since then Melias, Thadee and his wife have moved to the Ikongo area and we to Maroamboka, a village near Sandrohy. It was a very



At left, a typical Tanala village in a Madagascar rainforest.

Above, Tanala children pause for a photo. The Tanala, says Jurgen, have been very open to the gospel.

At right, Katja and the Hofmann children prepare for some school lessons on the porch of their forest home. Below, right, Jurgen works with Menja, a Malagasy believer, to translate Bible stories into the Tanala dialect.

difficult beginning for our family. First of all the house had to be set up and Katja had to find her routine home schooling the children. It was a challenge learning to live without a supermarket or even a market nearby. We have to buy enough vegetables and other supplies outside the area to last us over a month. Although we have a strong 4x4, the road is often inaccessible because of mud. We have come to realize we have to plan our trips carefully. Furthermore, although we are supposed to have running water in the house, more often than not the water pressure has failed. Rats were outnumbering us and damaging our things. During the monsoon it rained in our bed. We had many infections and I even had a medical evacuation by helicopter.

Things have become better over time though: we've made some adjustments to the car and found ways to get our vegetables closer by. The water problems have been solved for now and we seem to have chased away most of the rats. We have learned to live with uncertainties more and are truly and deeply thankful for every 'normal' day.

Finally, we have time to do mission work. Melias and Thadee moved into their area six months earlier and have already made tremendous progress. Being Malagasy, they already spoke the official language fluently so picking up the dialect was not such a big deal for them, as was familiarizing themselves with the local culture. They arrived on God's time. They

were well received in the smaller villages. It was as if people were waiting for the gospel. A few months after their arrival the first listeners were added to God's kingdom. Soon after, news reached us that Melias and Thadee had baptized their first converts. Groups of local believers now regularly meet to study the Bible.

As for us, we've made several friends who are helping us left and right, including with the language. Menja is the village teacher and he is a Christian. He is more than willing to help us. So far he has translated 40 key Bible stories from official Malagasy to the Tanala dialect. On a weekly basis he and I go over the stories, checking for proper language, sound theology and studying the implications of what is being said for the Tanala. I teach Menja English, and as a consequence I learn the Tanala dialect better. The plan is to continue checking the stories before and during our upcoming home assignment, and on return to start my rounds from village to village to share the Bible stories – the Good News of salvation by Jesus the Son of God – in the local dialect. Whether I go alone is to be seen. While working with Menja I noticed that he became more and more excited about the whole storytelling idea. Especially the stories that touch on the culture and the daily life of the Tanala people. When I asked him if he would like to go out and tell the stories to neighboring villages he exclaimed: "Oh yes, I would love it! I know so many people here and they



would love to hear these stories!" Looking back at the past six months of living in Maroamboka we see the tremendous progress: we have become part of the community and are included in what is happening; we have been able to help restore a clean water supply for the whole village and have helped recreate awareness for hygiene; we are learning the dialect by leaps and bounds; Menja – our language helper - has totally warmed up to the idea of Bible stories in the local dialect and has translated 40 key stories in draft. And lastly as a family we have come from surviving to thriving here.

We are confident that our God, who has started this work in and through us, will not abandon us or the Tanala, but will finish it! 🌍

