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Nenilava (Volahavana), Germaine

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woman of humility, who prays for her country).

Ravelonjanahary died on November 8, 1970, in Manoloitrony, about 120 years old. Manoloitrony has become a place of pilgrimage and now welcomes people who come for a retreat, to pray or to be healed. Other revival centers linked to the revival movement of Manoloitrony have sprung up almost everywhere in Madagascar.

Neuilava (Volahavana), Germaine

1920 to 1998

Lutheran

Madagascar

In the course of the last hundred-plus years, there have been four revival movements [12] of national significance in Madagascar, all of which have their roots in the established churches. The first revival movement sprang out of the Lutheran Protestant Church. This movement was followed by revivals in the Protestant Reformed Church, the Anglican Church and the Catholic Church. These movements have become pillars of strength in the churches of Madagascar and have been legitimized by church authorities. Germaine Volahavana, now known as Neuilava, gave birth to the fourth Revival Movement, centered in Ankaramalaza.

Volahavana is the name she was given at birth. Her father, Malady, was from the Antaimoro tribe and was of royal birth. Both king (*ampanjaka*) and healer/seer (*ombiasa*), he was well-known and well-respected in the region. Her mother's name was Vao. The family lived in Mandronda, in the canton of Lokomby, in the district of Manakara. Volahavana had several brothers and sisters and was the third of the four girls.

Volahavana's entire childhood was spent in a pagan context, and she did not like what her father did as a healer. Sometimes she even denigrated him in the presence of his clients and told him that she did not like these gods that always needed someone to interpret them to others. This made her father quite angry.

Volahavana also used to ask, "Can God be seen?" She wanted to come to know almighty God, if he existed. She did not feel like playing with the other children but preferred being alone so that she could nurture this constant feeling. When she was about ten years old, God began to reveal himself to Volahavana before she was even a Christian. It began with dreams: every night a tall man robed in white would take her to a large stone building. He would wash her feet and dry them with a towel, and then lay her on a bed and rock her to sleep. Then, at dawn, he would take her back home. In another dream, she would see herself being caught in a net and lifted up to heaven. These two dreams came to her regularly until she was twelve years old.

After that, the dreams stopped and Volahavana constantly heard a

voice calling her name towards the middle of the day. She would run home to see if her parents were calling her, but it just made them laugh; they thought she was crazy. She would then go outside and find refuge under a tree. She cleaned up the area around the tree and spent her time there crying or thinking about this God that she did not yet know. She often went there when her soul was troubled or hurt.

When she was fifteen years old [13] she received several marriage proposals, but since she had never thought about marriage, she turned them down. Her parents were confused by these refusals, and sent her to live with her sister in Manakara. She only spent one year there, preferring to return to the village in order to not be tempted by city life.

Malady could tell that his daughter's behavior was different from that of the other children, so he consulted his *sikidy* (oracle) and was overwhelmed by the answer. He discovered, in fact, that there was a greater spirit, a supreme God, living in his child. Volahavana was the queen, and he, her father, was the slave -- which seemed completely illogical to him. He became convinced that the God of Volahavana was the supreme and just God, the God above all the other gods. From then on, Malady put his idols aside and told his family that they needed to obey the God of Volahavana. He also prophesied that he would die two years after the start of Volahavana's ministry -- and that prophecy came true a few years later.

Her parents finally tired of her constantly turning down marriage proposals and pressured her into marrying Mosesy Tsirefo, a sixty-one year old catechist who was a widower and father of several children from his first wife. Volahavana had to take catechism classes in order to be baptized, which was a requirement for her Christian marriage. She learned the catechism lessons sufficiently well in two weeks, and was baptized in 1935 in Lokomby by Pastor Ramasivelo, taking Germaine as her baptismal name. After her marriage to Mosesy Tsirefo had been blessed by the church, they went to live in Ankaramalaza, [14] where her husband continued to teach her about the Christian religion. He was also helped in this by Pastor Rakotovao and Pastor Bernard Radafy.

God called Volahavana to serve him when she was twenty-one years old. One of Mosesy Tsirefo's daughters was sick, and possessed by an evil spirit. The catechist Petera de Vohidrafy was present and was trying to exorcise her. Volahavana was busy lighting the fire for cooking, when a voice suddenly ordered her to get up and to do something for the child. When she hesitated, an invisible force shoved her and placed her in front of the girl. She put her arms around her and struggled with her for a long time in this manner. At length, the evil spirit that was in the girl said, "We are going to leave, because the One who is stronger than we are is coming." Then a miracle happened: the young girl was healed and came back to her senses.

That miracle happened on Wednesday, August 1, 1941. On that night leading to the next morning, [15] Jesus told the three people who

were present at the healing, Volahavana, Mosesy Tsirefo, and Petera de Vohidrafy to “Get up, preach the Good News to the whole world. Chase the demons out. Commit yourselves...and do not delay. The time has come for the Son of man to be glorified in the Matitanana and Ambohibe tribes. I have chosen you for this mission. I command you to carry it out.”

The two catechists accepted readily, but Volahavana refused, saying that she was still young, that she did not know the Holy Scriptures and that she would not know how to preach. Nonetheless, Jesus persisted, telling her, “Get up and spread the Good News all around.” She submitted, but made a deal with Jesus by asking Him to tell her ahead of time what she would have to say, and Jesus consented.

Catechist Petera de Vohidrafy had already begun his mission as an evangelist when Volahavana joined his work. Some from Petera's group were jealous and mockingly gave her the nickname *Nenilava*, which literally means “big mother.” They did this to make fun of her height, because she was relatively tall for a Malagasy woman. Volahavana stood her ground and made no reply, but prayed, “Jesus, I’m ready to accept this ‘Nenilava’ nickname, but may your power be proclaimed throughout the world through it.” Her prayer was answered; she came to be known by that name through her mission and miracles happened through it. In fact, many people only knew her by that name.

As for her training, Jesus did not forget his promise, and granted her the gift of tongues, also teaching her the Holy Scriptures. *Nenilava* spent three months learning to speak the languages that she would eventually use to learn the Holy Scriptures. She was taught by Jesus himself. First, he taught her the twelve principal languages of the world, then he used them to converse with her. From that time forward, she spoke all twelve of those languages fluently.

Nenilava only used the gift of tongues to speak with Jesus, and not as the basis for her teaching. In the beginning of her ministry, she often spoke with Jesus in tongues, but later, she asked him to not use that gift when she was with other people, so that people with ill intentions would not be able to imitate her or use her to their own ends.

To teach her, Jesus used a white writing board and wrote on it in white as well. He wrote from top to bottom, as with Chinese writing. The lessons were held in a calm place either at home or in the forest, and the writing board was hung on the wall or from branches. Sometimes Jesus used a large book with very fine pages on which he wrote in white writing. In order to read it, *Nenilava* knelt all the way down to the ground. During the lessons, Jesus whispered words in her ear. When Mosesy Tsirefo saw her kneeling like that at home, he thought she was in prayer.

In order to teach her the Holy Scriptures, Jesus took her up to heaven seven times in three days. First, Jesus told her that she was going to die on Friday at 11:00 AM. Right away, the faithful from all over the district were told about it, and all those who could come did so - even

distant parishes sent representatives. Pastor Rajaona Salema was present as well. There was a constant succession of Bible readings and prayers.

Nenilava lay down on a bed draped in white to wait for the appointed time. Her body was covered with a white sheet except for her face, which was left uncovered. The ascension of her soul took place slowly. All those present were around her bed praying and singing continually for three days, awaiting her return. Her parents became discouraged and thought that she would not be returning, as it seemed to be taking a long time, but the Christians who were there fasted until she came back.

After three days, Nenilava came back on Sunday at 8:00 AM. Coming down from the bed, she preached the word of God from I Corinthians 15:55, "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" Jesus had taught her the four gospels.

Jesus then told Nenilava that she would have to fight with the dragon in order to harden her, because her mission would be one in which there would be no rest. This fight to the death lasted for three days. Jesus was always at her side. On the third day of fighting she defeated the beast in the name of Jesus. Following that victory, she fasted for two and a half months, during which time she ate only small white balls that looked like the host from the Lord's Supper.

When her mission began, there were twenty-eight young people working with her in Ankaramalaza. She began her evangelization campaign in her own region, near Manakara and Vohipeno. Her husband worked with her until his death in 1949. After that, Nenilava was invited to come to various churches and began to leave her region, starting in Antsirabe - which is where the central headquarters of the Norwegian Lutheran Mission was located -- and continuing in that vicinity. She then went up to Imerina, the capital city Antananarivo, and the surrounding area. From there, she responded to many invitations to visit other regions - Tamatave, Majunga, and even out to the Comoros Islands. In 1973, she also went abroad to follow up on invitations from several churches. She was accompanied by Mrs. Razanamiadana, a shepherdess-evangelist. During these visits, she was able to give her witness to the word of God to various audiences.

Accompanied by her collaborators and friends, Nenilava was accustomed to working with pastors and churches. Wherever she was, people came from all around to pray, to receive care or to be exorcised, and still others brought their sick. There were miracles: blind people recovered their sight, sick people were healed, and even personal or family problems were resolved. She kept the same practices wherever she went: prayer, preaching of the good news, exorcism (*asa*) and the laying on of hands accompanied by encouraging and comforting words (*fampaherezana*) drawn from Bible verses.

In 1973, when the King of Norway asked her to describe her work, she answered: "I preach the gospel, I heal the mentally ill, I educate young

delinquents, raise up infants and the elderly."

Through her ongoing ministry, the *Toby Ankaramalaza* (Revival center of Ankaramalaza) gradually became a place where people could come. Once they had been healed either physically or morally, most people settled there, because they did not want to go back home. Little by little, the center built a school for children and a dispensary. Potable water in the form of drinking fountains along the road and electricity came later. Nenilava also built the cathedral she dreamed of building, based on a cathedral she had seen in Norway.

Gradually, annexes of the Toby Ankaramalaza were built here and there throughout Madagascar, such as the one in the Ambohibao area of the capital, built in the 1980s; and another in the French village of Pours St. Rémy, located near Charleville-Mezières, which was built in the 1990s.

After 1975, her travels gradually wound down, and she lived most of the year in her home, which was built in the Revival Center of Ambohibao.

Thanks to Nenilava's ministry, many Malagasy, Europeans and Africans received Jesus, were delivered from the grasp of sin and enslavement to the Devil, and came to the knowledge of new life and the peace and light of the Holy Spirit. Nenilava never claimed to be a prophetess, but her deeds and her words of truth bore witness to her gift.

Nenilava adopted children. These came to her from the children's biological parents out of thanksgiving for God's answers to their prayers. She not only took care of their spiritual education, but like all parents, she took care of their general education as well, so that they would be well-rounded in every aspect of their lives. Also, throughout the island, as well as elsewhere, she had spiritual children who were attached to her, and she loved them and prayed for them.

Nenilava's childhood wishes were granted: she was able to meet this Almighty God that she wanted to know, and to know his power through her mission. Her wish to go up to heaven was also realized.

Nenilava died in 1998 in her home in the Revival Center in Ambohibao-Antananarivo and her body was carried to the village where she was born. Mourners buried her within the walls of the Toby Ankaramalaza. Like a good, loving mother, she had set a good example and had left it to her children and to her co-workers to continue the work of evangelization and the works of good will that she had begun, in faith and in love for one another. [16]

Notes:

1. The LMS (London Missionary Society) arrived in the Betsileo region in 1870 through the person of Rev. Richardson, who lived in Fianarantsoa.

2. There are eighteen different tribes in Madagascar, each with their own customs and language, but they can understand and talk to each other in the official languages of Madagascar, Malagasy and French.
3. The first twelve disciples (apostles)—all men—of this revival movement were Rajeremia, Rainitiaray, Razanabelo, Rasoarimanga, Ratahina, Reniestera, Ralohotsy, Rasamy, Ramanjatoela, Razanamanga, Rasoambola.
4. In Soatanàna, up until the time of the revival, and especially in the villages, houses were built with rooms open to the kitchen, so as to conserve warmth in the winter. Since people cooked on a wood fire, the ceilings were often black with soot. Chickens had also been kept inside, but were now put outside so that houses could be kept clean.
5. Soatanàna is a Norwegian mission station that was established by a missionary named Lindo in 1877. Missionary Théodor Olsen took his place in 1891, and was a witness to the birth of the revival movement (1895).
6. According to Malagasy custom, the dead were supposed to be buried in the family tomb. If someone died far from their natal village, one year after the burial, if possible, the family brought the body home to be buried there.
7. *The Natives Law* was adopted June 28, 1881. In 1887 the French government put it into effect in all of its colonies. In general terms, the law subjected natives and immigrant workers to forced labor, forbade them to travel at night, made them subject to searches and to a tax on their reserves, and subjected them to a whole range of similarly degrading measures. It was a booklet of discretionary measures that intended to make sure that “good colonial order,” the order that was based on the institutionalization of the inequality of justice, was always in effect. This code was constantly “improved” so as to adapt the interests of the colonizers to the “realities of the land.” *The Natives Law* differentiated between two categories of citizens: French citizens (of metropolitan origin) and French subjects, that is, black Africans, Malagasy, Algerians, Antilleans, Melanesians, etc., as well as immigrant workers. French subjects who were in subjection to the Natives Law were deprived of the greater part of their freedom and political rights; on the civilian level, they retained only their personal status, whether that was of customary or of religious origin. *The Natives Law* was replete with all manner of prohibitions, and infringement was punishable by imprisonment or deportation. This system of social and legal inequality lasted until 1946, which is several years after the Geneva Accords (April 23, 1938) had forbidden all forms of forced labor. (Quotation from the Web site http://www.tlq.ulaval.ca/axl/afrique/indigenat_code.html, consulted in March 2009, [“L’aménagement linguistique dans le monde,” authored by Jacques Leclerc, associate member of the TLFO]).

8. The newspaper *Mifoha I Madagasikara* ("Madagascar Wakes Up") strove to destroy superstition as well as belief in God; the paper *Masoandro* ("The Sun") also aimed to destroy the Christian faith by presenting the scientific side of things and the "scientific" truth.
9. On the war of religion between Catholics and Protestants: When Madagascar was colonized by France (1896), the Jesuits took advantage of the situation and declared that the Malagasy people should also be Catholic. They took over the Protestant churches by force, and those who continued to frequent them were required to become Catholics.
10. Concerning "Mama" or mother: in a Malagasy family, it is customary for children to have nicknames. The oldest girl is either called *ramatoa* (eldest girl), or "mama" or mother, as she is the one who takes care of her brothers and sisters, and who is responsible for all the household work.
11. *Ranovelona* is the journal of the former protestant students of the School of the Protestant Mission (Foreign Friends Mission Association, or FFMA) in North Ambohitatovo, later called Paul Minault School.
12. The four great revival movements that occurred in Madagascar are the following: the revival movement in Soatanàna with Rainisoalambo (1894), the revival movement in Manolotrony with Ravelonjanahary (1927), the revival movement in Farihimena with Daniel Rakotozandriny (1939), and the revival center in Ankaramalaza with Nenilava (1941).
13. In former times, young Malagasy girls generally got married around age fifteen. Only boys were allowed to go to school. Girls helped their mothers at home while they waited to be married. A family was dishonored if a young girl of marriageable age stayed at home and continued living with her parents.
14. Ankaramalaza is a small town located about twenty kilometers north of Vohipeno. Before that, it was a pasture and a cultivated field that Mosesy Tsirefo had asked of Malady, Nenilava's father, so that he could grow coffee, bananas, oranges and rice there. Mosesy had then built a house there for himself and his family, and another one for his workers. After the death of his wife, he married Germaine Volahavana (Nenilava), who came and lived with him there. It was only after 1953 that the place began to be called a "revival center" because a lot of sick people had already been coming there.
15. August 1 and August 2 are remembered every year at the Toby Ankaramalaza, and the 2nd of August is reserved for the consecration of future shepherds. Every year there is a significant pilgrimage there. The Ankaramalaza annex centers (toby) are represented there every year, as well as the other centers of the revival movement.

16. I [the author] am also grateful to God because although I had heard of Nenilava in my youth, it wasn't until many years later that I decided to meet her at the Toby Ambohibao in 1997. I was consecrated there as a “shepherdess: of the “Santatra” level, (“Santatra” means “first fruits”). Santatra is the name she had given to the first group, or level, of shepherds, right at the beginning of her ministry. While she was still living, she herself gave the names. After she died, starting in 1998, the office of the revival center in Ankaramalaza decided to give the subsequent groups the same names that she had given to the very first groups.

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