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Review of "Il Madagascar nella vita di Raombana primo storico malgascio (1809-1855)" by Liliana Mosca

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A Historian's Life

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A HISTORIAN'S LIFE

Il Madagascar nella vita di Raombana primo storico malgascio (1809-1855). By LILIANA MOSCA. Naples: Giannini, 1980. Pp. 309. L.12,000.

Raombana was the first Malagasy historian in the modern sense of the word. He was born in the kingdom of Imerina in central Madagascar in 1809, at a time when Europeans were penetrating the interior of the island for the first time. Together with his twin brother and a handful of other young notables, he was sent for education in England under the auspices of the London Missionary Society and thus became one of the first Merina to travel abroad and return to tell the tale, to learn English and above all to become thoroughly literate. He returned to his native land in 1828, more at ease speaking English than his mother tongue. He spent the rest of his life high in royal service at the court of Queen Ranaivalona I, who closed Imerina to all but a few Europeans. Raombana acted as her private secretary during a period of rapid and dramatic change, years which are normally considered by historians as a dark age due to the relative lack of documents in French or English. As well as producing official correspondence for Her Majesty, Raombana kept a diary which he wrote in English to preserve its confidentiality. He later used this record as the basis for a history of Imerina from the earliest times up to his own lifetime. It too is in English. The resulting manuscript, of great sophistication and interest, is full of sharp and even cynical observations on the bloody times in which he lived and on the courtiers whom he knew. The history extended to about 8,000 manuscript pages of which some 6,000 survive. Raombana's papers were dispersed after his death, although various fragments were known to scholars. It was not until the 1960s that the French historian Simon Ayache began to piece together Raombana's work and to investigate the life of the author; the result was Ayache's book *Raombana l'historien* (1976; reviewed by Alain Delivré in *J. Afr. Hist.*, 1978, p. 469).

Whereas Ayache presented certain aspects of Raombana's life and studied his technique as an historian, Dr Mosca has written a more conventional type of biography. It is thorough, well-written, fully documented and beautifully produced. It has excellent indexes and 86 pages of annexed documents. This reviewer found just three minor spelling or printing errors with Malagasy and English names. Her reconstruction of Raombana's life tells us most of what we are ever likely to know about him, although there is probably still some scope for a study of the official records now preserved in the archives of the Malagasy republic, some of which were penned by Raombana as the queen's secretary. From time to time Dr Mosca corrects Ayache on points of detail; and on certain matters, such as the death of Raombana and the fate of certain parts of his manuscript, she proposes new explanations.

But in all probability we will only gain a deeper understanding of Raombana by studying the times in which he lived. The politics of Ranaivalona I's court have been very little studied or understood, and the social and economic background of the period still less so. Until that gap has been filled, let us read Raombana's own work. There is still no published edition of his manuscript available, although at the time of writing it is rumoured that M. Ayache has just produced the first volume of a bilingual French/English edition. Historians of Madagascar await it, and succeeding volumes, with impatience. A biography of Raombana is really only an appetiser to reading his own words.

London

STEPHEN ELLIS