

**From Blessing to Violence. History and Ideology in the Circumcision Ritual of the Merina of Madagascar; Madagascar, Island of the Ancestors**



Review Author[s]:  
Stephen Ellis

*The Journal of African History*, Vol. 28, No. 3. (1987), p. 465.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0021-8537%281987%2928%3A3%3C465%3AFBTVHA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-V>

*The Journal of African History* is currently published by Cambridge University Press.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/cup.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

*From Blessing to Violence. History and ideology in the circumcision ritual of the Merina of Madagascar.* By MAURICE BLOCH. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. Pp. 214. £30.

*Madagascar, island of the ancestors.* By JOHN MACK. London: British Museum Publications, 1986. Pp. 98, illus. (11 colour, 78 b/w). £6.50 (soft covers).

The first of these books is the fruit of over twenty years' study of the Merina people of Madagascar by an anthropologist, but it is not a book just for anthropologists. The Merina have a deep sense of their own history, and Professor Bloch has increasingly come to view Merina institutions and rituals in their historical perspective, which makes his work essential reading for historians. Your reviewer must declare an interest, in that he is given a generous acknowledgement in the preface of Professor Bloch's book. However, your reviewer remains impartial: this is a masterly analysis of the evolution and meaning of the circumcision ritual, a pillar of Merina society. Like other rituals, it was transformed by the old Merina monarchy into an institution of state, so that Professor Bloch's description of its history and significance tells us much about Merina statecraft. This is a subtle interpretation, which rejects the crude view that circumcision or other national rituals are simply the means by which one class dominates another, or that they are vehicles for the transmission of ideas about life and cosmology. Merina circumcision is both more and less than this.

This is history from an interesting perspective, one which – to judge from the recorded Merina oral traditions – comes close to presenting present and past in the way the Merina themselves did, through ritual. In this sense this book should be read not just by specialists of Madagascar but by any scholar who is interested in a fresh approach to African history which is neither determinist nor narrative.

Dr John Mack's book is the catalogue for an exhibition currently on view at the Museum of Mankind in London. The exhibition itself is excellent. So is the catalogue which constitutes the best short introduction to Malagasy culture in English. Cunningly, it also has learned much from Malagasy tradition in its presentation. Chapters on Malagasy history are interspersed with others on modern culture, again echoing the structure of the old oral traditions. The Malagasy themselves record their history by reference to their present culture, so what better way to understand them?

London

STEPHEN ELLIS

*Barcos, negocios y burgueses en el Puerto de la Luz, 1883-1913.* By FRANCISCO QUINTANA NAVARRO (Cuadernos Canarios de Ciencias Sociales, 12). Las Palmas de Gran Canaria: La Caja de Canarias, 1985. Pp. 242. 1,000 ptas.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the maritime traffic of north-western Africa both grew at a tremendous rate and changed in nature. The ever-larger steamers on the African and South American routes converged on an ever-smaller number of deep-water ports, and the competition between Dakar, the Cape Verdes, Madeira and the Canaries became ferocious. Francisco Quintana has produced an excellent account of the development of the La Luz port in Gran Canaria, based on an impressive spread of archival material. His main focus is on the growth of a local bourgeoisie tied to the port, and he shows how dependent Canaries businessmen were on the great European shipping companies, especially those of Britain. Not until the turn of the century did the local entrepreneurs begin to adopt a slightly more aggressive stance against the foreign domination of the economy. The book contains many penetrating insights into the social history of the islands