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978-0-521-31404-6 - From Blessing to Violence: History and Ideology in the Circumcision
Ritual of the Merina of Madagascar

Maurice Bloch

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FROM BLESSING TO VIOLENCE

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From blessing to violence

**History and ideology in the circumcision ritual
of the Merina of Madagascar**

MAURICE BLOCH



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To

SIR RAYMOND FIRTH

in thanks for asking questions that I am still trying to answer

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Preface

This book has been almost fifteen years in the making because, when I started to produce a study that combined anthropological research and primary historical research, I did not realise the sheer practical difficulties of the enterprise. It is an attempt to combine knowledge of the intimate interconnections of all the aspects of life and the subjective empathy, which are the main values of participant observation, with the historical perspective, which is necessary to face up genuinely to the sociological questions and wider theoretical issues the material presents.

Perhaps it was the historical side that was most time-consuming for someone little used to dealing with archives. It was because of the help of several professionals that I got anywhere at all. I feel greatly indebted to the following historians, who have drawn my attention to potential sources and have commented on my use of this material: S. Ayache, G. Berg, S. Ellis, M. Esoavelomandroso, F. Raison-Jourde.

The anthropological field-work also required help of another kind. First of all it was only possible because of the willingness and even encouragement of the peoples whose lives I was able to share in the villages of Madagascar where the research was carried out. I learned a lot from them, notably about their customs and society, but also about myself and my society and the issues of life, death and moral commitment, which what they said and did forced me to reconsider. This research was made possible by financial help I received from various funding bodies. My research from 1964 to 1966 was principally funded by the Nuffield Foundation, and my field-work in 1971 was funded by the Social Science Research Council. I also received help of various kinds from the Universities of Madagascar and Cambridge and the London School of Economics.

The combination of anthropology and history has also posed practical problems in the preparation of the manuscript. It has been my intention to present a book that is of interest to a reasonably wide readership because it contributes to issues of general interest in the social sciences. In order to do this, I have had to omit much detail.

On the historical side I have not been able to deal with all of the very large

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number of references to the circumcision ceremony in the published literature. To have done so would have been out of place here because the majority of these references add nothing to what we know from the sources I have discussed, as they are almost entirely derivative. It would have been, however, more satisfactory to have reproduced the texts I discuss in full, but this would have made the book inordinately long. I hope to discuss some of these bibliographic problems elsewhere. On the anthropological side, I feel that some details of the rituals I witnessed are still missing. This is partly due to the incompleteness of my notes and, once again, to the problems of presentation in a short book. For example, the lack of transcription and detailed discussion of the music of the ritual is an obvious gap.

Two books are insufficiently acknowledged in the text. This is because I became acquainted with their contents after the part of the book to which they are relevant had been completed. The first is the little-known thesis by J. Foltz (1965), which is remarkably perceptive, especially bearing in mind that it is not backed by firsthand knowledge of the ritual. The other is a two-volume study by L. Molet (1979) that is a veritable encyclopedia of the literature on the Merina. It is an invaluable source, and I was glad to find that Molet's interpretations are often almost identical with mine.

Finally, I must acknowledge the great help I have received in preparing the book and in developing and forming the argument. Because this book has been so long in the making, I have presented parts of it to many academic seminars and have benefited from so many comments and criticisms that it is impossible for me to acknowledge them all. I must, however, particularly thank the University of Madagascar at Antananarivo and at Toliary; the Universities of Stockholm and Göteborg in Sweden; the National Museum of Ethnology, Suita, Japan; and the CEDRASEMI and the Ecole des Hautes Etudes, France, for the opportunities they have given me to present my arguments. Certain individuals have also made valuable suggestions and comments, especially T. Gibson, D. Lan, A. Papataxiarkis, S. Tanabe and C. Toren. Three people in particular have given me such help that without them this book would not have been possible in its present form: J. Parry and S. Roberts commented not only on one draft in great detail but even on different drafts of certain chapters and made major suggestions. This was also true of C. Toren, whose editorial work on the manuscript infinitely improved it.