



THE DEBATE: THE MENALAMBA REVOLT

In November 1895, less than 8 weeks after a French army had occupied the Merina capital of Madagascar, the Malagasy rose in a major rebellion that was not finally put down until June 1897. It has become known as the ‘Menalamba Revolt’, named from the traditional white shawl (*‘lamba’*) of the peasantry that became stained by the red laterite soil of the countryside. The red shawl was a mark of the rural peasantry – it was thus perceived to be a peasant’s revolt. The rising was characterised by an anti-Christian xenophobia: it started with 2000 Malagasy attacking and killing a British missionary family and a Merina Governor.



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The French historian Hubert Deschamps’ *Histoire de Madagascar*, published in 1972, was the first general history of the country written by a professional historian in the post-colonial era. His interpretation of the Menalamba revolt thus established a degree of orthodoxy. He saw it as Merina conservatives objecting to Christianity becoming the official state religion in 1869 and to the modernising economic reforms of Merina Prime Minister Rainilaiarivony. The knowledge that the French wanted to maintain the system through the ‘indirect rule’ of a protectorate sparked off the revolt. The French takeover, according to Deschamps, was the opportunity to eradicate the current Merina system and restore something of the ‘pure’ Merina authority of the old pre-Christian era.

Bonar Gow, writing in the late 1970s sought to extend this general thesis by focussing upon the work of the British missionaries [*Madagascar and the Protestant Impact. The Work of the British Missions, 1818-95*]. Gow believed that the revolt occurred because a modernising Merina Government was imposing ‘Christianity and capitalism’ upon an unwilling Malagasy public. The anti-Christian element of the revolt, therefore, was a rejection of “Westernisation” and an attempt to revert to traditional pre-Christian religious and material values.

Stephen Ellis, writing in the mid-1980s, [*The Rising of the Red Shawls. A Revolt in Madagascar, 1895-1899*] built upon the work of Deschamps and Gow, accepting their general approach though with greater nuances, referring to elements of millenarian Christianity and pointing out that it was anti state-Christianity rather than Christianity per se. Ellis also added that the ranks of

the rebels were swelled by brigands and peasantry fleeing the oppressive taxation of the Merina regime.

Shortly after Ellis's book was published, the hitherto established interpretation of the Menalamba revolt, as built by Deschamps, Gow and Ellis, was challenged by Gwyn Campbell, who had written his PhD thesis on "The Role of the LMS in the Rise of the Merina Empire," (University of Wales, 1985). He took issue with them over their emphasis on the political and religious motives for the anti-Christian element in the Menalamba revolt. In a series of articles published in 1987 and 1988, he argued that their interpretations of the revolt's underlying motivation "miss the essentially economic motive of the Merina state-church." ['Missionaries, Fanompoana and the Menalamba Revolt in late nineteenth century Madagascar', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol.15, No.1 (1988), p. 56]

Campbell's convincing interpretation is as follows. Non-conformist Protestant Christianity (mainly British London Missionary Society (LMS) and Norwegian missions) became established in Madagascar in the early 19th century. At the time the Merina king, Radama I, feared an impending British takeover of Madagascar from Mauritius, which they had taken from the French in 1810. In 1825, therefore, Radama set his country on a course of establishing self-reliance in agriculture and industry, using labour-intensive techniques on state-run agricultural and industrial enterprises. The labour was to come from *fanompoana*, a system of unpaid forced labour, extracted from the free common peasantry (not slaves, also common in Madagascar). The system had evolved in the past to cope with emergencies or occasional state projects which were perceived to be in the national interest. Radama decided that the entire self-sufficient-economy project was 'in the national interest' and *fanompoana* was exploited accordingly. An integral part of this was an expansion of the imperial army which, argued Campbell, "was less of a military machine than a vast economic organisation structured to serve the commercial, agricultural and . . . industrial needs of the imperial court." [ibid., p.56]

Thus from 1825 *fanompoana* became the basis of the imperial economy for most of the 19th century. Mission schools were perceived as a useful recruiting ground for the imperial army and the state encouraged the establishment of more schools with this recruitment in mind. It is in this light, argued Campbell, that one should see the official conversion of the Merina court to Christianity in 1869 and the establishment of Christianity as the official state religion. The Church now became an instrument of state and Church school enrolment became in effect a census for potential *fanompoana* recruitment into the imperial army and economic enterprises. This process only intensified with the economic crisis engendered by the French trading competition which undermined Imerina in the 1870s, followed by the human and material costs of

the Franco-Merina War of 1883-85. The Church was thus an integral part of the ruthless exploitation of the peasantry – not only to satisfy the labour demands of the state, but also the Church's own labour needs – to build chapels and schools and even to fund the salaries of Church personnel. Within a year of 1869 the number of LMS congregations increased from 148 to 621 and the number of their schools from 28 to 359. By 1880 the LMS had 1024 chapels and 862 schools – all built with forced labour.

As French pressure increased – especially after 1890 when the British recognised Madagascar as part of the French 'sphere of influence' (in return for French recognition of British power over Zanzibar) – so the Merina government of a supposedly 'modernising' Prime Minister increased the demands of *fanompoana*. The French military entry into the capital was virtually unopposed in the expectation that the Merina system of government – as had been practised for the previous 70 years – would be brought to an end, whatever the alternative might be. When the French made it clear that they intended to merely establish a 'protectorate' that would exercise 'indirect rule', leaving the old Merina system fully intact, the reaction was immediate and violent. Those most immediately in the rebels' target were the local implementers of the hated *fanompoana*, the Christian state-church. By June 1897, when most of the revolt has been crushed, a total of 750 chapels had been burnt to the ground, most of them belonging to the LMS.

In spite of his earlier work on the 'Red Shawl' rising, Stephen Ellis, writing an overview of Madagascar's history in conjunction with Madagascan historian Solofo Randrianja (Hurst, London, 2009), has subsequently downplayed the whole Menalamba Revolt as little more than general banditry. The full nature and long-term significance of the Menalamba Revolt is clearly still open to debate.

[For full Madagascan references, see Further Reading for Chapter 19].