CHAPTER TWO

JAMES SIBREE AND LARS DAHLE:
NORWEGIAN AND BRITISH MISSIONARY ETHNOGRAPHY AS
A TRANSNATIONAL AND NATIONAL ACTIVITY

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The settler makes history and is conscious of making it. And because he constantly refers to the history of his mother country, he clearly indicates that he himself is the extension of that mother country. Thus the history which he writes is not the history of the country which he plunders but the history of his own nation.

Frantz Fanon

In the 1870s, two missionaries, one British and the other Norwegian, produced two books with almost identical titles. James Sibree, a missionary working for the London Missionary Society (LMS), published Madagascar and its people in 1870, while the missionary Lars Dahle from the Norwegian Missionary Society (NMS) published the two-volume work Madagaskar og dets beboere (Madagascar and its inhabitants) in 1876–7. Both authors’ works provide a rich source of information about Madagascar at the time, and reflect the knowledge about the island’s history, geography, natural science and ethnography that was currently available. However, while these books have much in common, there are also marked differences between the ways these two authors describe the Malagasy population and culture.

The history of the protestant mission in Madagascar is closely intertwined with the history of a pre-colonial kingdom, the Merina kingdom in highland Madagascar. The Merina kingdom, which was a small kingdom among many others until the eighteenth century, owed its expansion largely to the international slave trade.¹ The arrival of the

protestant mission was part of a larger process of imperial powers seeking influence and establishing relations with an expanding local state. In 1820, the LMS started a successful mission literally within the Merina court, cultivating its relationship with a government who at the time was positive towards, and profited from, European influence. The missionaries became tools in an ambitious project to create a modern state in Madagascar. Though the British missionaries were expelled from the country for a long period between 1835 and 1862, their position within the Merina court resulted in one of their most successful missions ever. The British success lay in the background of the Norwegian mission's arrival on the island in 1867. In short, the two missions operated in the local context as warmly welcomed missionaries in the largest pre-colonial kingdom south of Sahara. However, while the relationship between the missionaries and the Malagasy government at the time was quite harmonious, the relationship between the mission societies was more ambiguous. When James Sibree and Lars Dahl wrote their books, the relatively recently arrived Norwegian missionaries stood as rivals to the LMS. They tried to position themselves, both in terms of territory and as Lutherans, against the long-established British Congregationalists.

This chapter addresses the divergences in the ways Sibree and Dahl portrayed the Malagasy people and society. Are the contrasts between the two, otherwise so similar, texts understandable in terms of the rivalry between the mission organisations? Can they be attributed to differences in scholarly interest, personality or religious affiliation? Do the texts represent differences between a British and a Norwegian perspective? Historically there had been close contact between the British and Norwegian missions; information and written publications circulated between the two countries and between the missionaries. Both Sibree and Dahl were familiar with each others' work. However, significant contrasts between the British and Norwegian societies at the time made both the missionaries' background, and the context for the reception of their ethnographic work, vary. I discuss the contrasts between the texts in relation to social and cultural processes in the authors' home societies.

Colonialism was a plural phenomenon involving different groups, different empires and nations, different projects and different outcomes. If missionary ethnography can be seen as a part of a larger colonial discourse, what difference will it make if one of the authors was a representative of the British Empire, while the other came from Norway, a country situated on the periphery of the colonial empires?