SACRIFICE, NARRATIVES AND EXPERIENCE IN EAST MADAGASCAR

BY

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This essay examines the role of sacrifice in mediating individual and collective experience through an analysis of sacrifice as it is practiced among rural Southern Betsimisaraka of east Madagascar. The practice of cattle sacrifice is central to the constitution of Southern Betsimisaraka identity, both mediating and transforming people's experience of, and relationship to, their ancestral homeland and the outside world. Again and again throughout their lives, villagers find themselves thwarted by more powerful beings, either caught between ancestral demands and the need to fulfill their personal desires and ambitions, or faced by the need to negotiate the economic and political forces of post-colonial Madagascar, forces they are keenly aware operate differently from, and are more powerful than, their own. I will focus specifically on sacrificial narratives, produced in the long speech, or kabary, performed just prior to the slaughter of the animal. Sacrifices are held when people do things that displease the ancestors, thereby provoking their illness-inducing and potentially murderous wrath. Narratives produced in sacrifice are thus about the stories and dramas produced as villagers go about the intensely absorbing business of 'making themselves living,' and how their quests for life, love and fortune inevitably bring them into conflict with forces more powerful than themselves. Such narratives inform the experience of village life, providing an array of possible interpretations of the human predicament, as people try and shape a refractory world to the measure of their own intentions. Further, narratives produced in sacrifice extend well beyond the ritual context, as people who attend the sacrifice return to their homes and continue to discuss and reflect on the negotiations that took place.

In his theory of symbolic action, Godfrey Lienhardt provides a powerful tool for understanding how the practice of sacrifice works to mediate
people's experience. He argued that in sacrifice Dinka dramatize situations they seek to control. For example in a sacrifice which marks the end of a feud between two parties, the sacrificial cow is divided in two across the belly, the division of the beast being intended to stand for the termination of the feuding relationship (1960: 288). Through this symbolic act, Dinka are able to control 'primarily a set of mental and moral dispositions' which 'if they do not change actual historical or physical events ... do change and regulate the Dinka's experience of those events' (ibid., 291). Lienhardt's approach represents a significant advance over earlier theories, many of which, following the sacrificial schema proposed by Hubert and Mauss (1964), focused on how sacrifice, by putting people in contact with the divine, enables the transformation of social status. What Lienhardt's theory failed to take into account, however, is the particular social processes through which the attitudes and beliefs reflected in sacrifice become internalized, a part of people's understanding about how the world works, thus constituting a particular kind of subjectivity or orientation.

In analyzing the Betsimisaraka practice of sacrifice I wish to extend Lienhardt's insights into how sacrifice works as symbolic action by examining the role of sacrificial narratives, and the way they inform and shape people's experience. We know that the histories of other people's experience saturate the various worlds in which we live, just as experience is produced in tension with the tropes and conventions, the borrowed plots and moods of other people's stories (Steedly, 1993). Moreover, narratives simultaneously produce dual landscapes of action and consciousness (Bruner, 1986), help form a sense of self and identity (Schafer, 1992), and are central to the constitution of meaningful subjects (Bomeman, 1992). Finally, as Peel has brilliantly argued, 'narrative empowers because it enables its possessor to integrate his memories, experiences and aspirations in a schema of long-term action' (1995: 587). For Betsimisaraka, narratives produced in sacrifice play a crucial role in the connection between the public act of sacrifice and private experience. Stories produced both within and beyond the practice of sacrifice are pivotal in shaping human action, as they form the critical link between the actions of the past and intentions of the future.

There are two dimensions of narrative implicit in Betsimisaraka sacrifice. First, the ritual of sacrifice itself provides a dramatic narrative of ancestry, community and connection as people come to share the flesh of a cow, one that symbolizes their link to the ancestors and to one another. Second, and more importantly, the stories that people tell about sacrifice—why ones does it, whether it works, and what happened at