



## Adventists Through Academic Eyes

An Interview with Eva Keller | BY ALITA BYRD

**Editor's Note:** In 2005, Palgrave Macmillan published *The Road to Clarity: Seventh-day Adventism in Madagascar*. This social anthropological study, written after two years of fieldwork by Eva Keller (right), has been acclaimed by academics and read with interest by Adventists.

The study, which began as a Ph.D. thesis for the London School of Economics in 2002, examines the intellectual life of Malagasy Adventists, and examines the reasons they remain members of the church.

Eva Keller says she did not know much about Adventists before she began her study, but her objective approach offers instructive insights into our worldwide church, particularly its growth and impact in the third world.

*Spectrum* asked Keller about how Malagasy Adventists interpret the Bible and what she learned while living among them.

**Q: Why did you decide to study Adventism in Madagascar?**



**A:** I first traveled to Madagascar in 1987 together with a Swiss friend of mine who has family there. While traveling, we met a family in Maroantsetra [a seaport town on the east of the island]. I then stayed in touch with them for eleven years before returning to Madagascar.

Close contact with local people is very important in social anthropology. So when I was preparing for fieldwork—as a Ph.D. student at the London School of Economics—I decided to go and do my research where my friends lived.

I thought that my friends in Madagascar were Jehovah's Witnesses, and so I decided to research Jehovah's Witnesses, as there are practically no social anthropological studies of this kind of "fundamentalist" church in Africa, while its membership grows by the day. I only found out upon arrival that I was wrong, and my friends were actually Seventh-day Adventists! Thus I changed my study to Seventh-day Adventism.

**Q: You spent two years among the Malagasy Adventist community. What was your first impression of Malagasy Adventists? How did your impression change over the time you spent there?**

**A:** I had assumed, completely wrongly as I found out, that the Malagasy Adventists would be very strict fundamental-



ists. I imagined them to be sectarian and, frankly, unpleasant people to be with.

I soon realized this was not at all the case, and that they were perfectly "normal" people and extremely nice, as most Malagasy people are. I was received with warmth and openness.

I was also struck by the importance of "knowledge" for the Seventh-day Adventists in Madagascar. There is an entry to that effect in my field notes as early as day two. I was taken aback because this was not at all what I had expected. I had expected narrow-minded fundamentalists and instead I found open-minded, friendly people who seemed to be very concerned with learning from the Bible.

**Q: Can you explain the main thesis you came to through your study in Madagascar? Why is Adventism growing?**

**A:** My study focuses not so much on why people join the church, but



rather why they remain in it, and on what they find fascinating once they are in it. The reasons for joining, which are often very pragmatic, do not necessarily need to be the reasons for remaining, and the former do not explain the attraction of the church.

This is a key argument in my book and also a criticism of the available literature in the social sciences, which focuses almost exclusively on the reasons for conversion. But the story doesn't end there—in fact, that is only the beginning.

My main conclusion, which is well summarized in Rich Hannon's review of my book (page 75, below), is that the key attraction of Adventism for members in Madagascar is the intellectual activity that goes with being a Seventh-day Adventist, that is, with studying the Bible very thoroughly (this is so, too, for people with very little formal education). This is the "Road" in the title of the book.

The second part of the argument, which follows from the first, is that this road of intellectual engagement leads to an emphasis on rationally understanding the workings of the cosmos. Thus, Malagasy Adventists' ideas of Paradise refer not primarily to a place of bliss and prosperity or the like, but to a place where the truth will be clear and visible, where there will be no more doubt or misunderstanding about what is going on in the world, where those living in Paradise together with God will know and understand. This is the "Clarity" of the title of the book.

Both aspects, the *Road* and the *Clarity*, reveal a strong emphasis on learning, rationality, knowledge of facts, and understanding. This conclusion is quite radical in comparison to other studies of "evangelical/fundamentalist"

churches in the social sciences. These tend to argue that fundamentalists are poor or otherwise marginalized people who see membership in such a church as an escape route from their destitute situation and who are misled by their leaders who promise them easy access to wealth and health.

**Q: Do you think your findings can be extrapolated into other countries and other communities?**

**A:** I do not know. However, a key argument in my book is that not everything can be explained by cultural and historical context (as tends to be the case in the social sciences).

The fascination with intellectual activity among the Adventists in Madagascar cannot satisfactorily be explained or understood by context alone. Indeed, Adventists in Madagascar create a lot of trouble between themselves and their non-Adventist kin by becoming practicing members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

This is because Adventists cannot and do not participate in some of the most fundamental kinship activities in Madagascar—especially the communication with one's ancestors. For their kin who are not Adventists, which is the great majority, this is beyond comprehension and amounts to a refusal of kinship.

**Q: Were the people open and honest and willing to talk about their religion? Where did you live while you were on the island? Did you travel throughout the island, or did you concentrate on a few communities?**

**A:** As Rich Hannon writes so nicely in his review, social anthropological

studies are "an inch wide and a mile deep." This means that one usually lives for a long time in the same local community sharing people's daily lives, worries, and joys. In my case, I lived for the most part with the above-mentioned family in a small, almost rural, town, and I spent about five months in a village in the vicinity with another Adventist family. This was really to broaden my view and to kind of check on what I had found in the town. What I say comes from these locations, but there is no reason to think that it would be different elsewhere in Madagascar.

Apart from participant observation, I also interviewed people about specific topics such as ancestor worship.

All Adventists in these two places were extremely friendly and welcomed me with openness and warmth into their community. I shared their religious life, though I never made a secret out of the fact that I am myself not an Adventist. Though my friends sometimes wondered why I didn't convert, they never tried to pressure me into doing so—again, this was completely contrary to what I had expected.

I explained to them that I was writing a book about them and they felt honored by that fact and were more than willing to talk to me about all sorts of things and to have me there during their religious activities. (The only thing I was not allowed to actively participate in was the foot-washing ritual and communion.)

Though many of the people in Madagascar probably overestimated the influence of my book (recall that most people have very little formal education and no experience of the world beyond their dis-

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## CONVERSATIONS

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trict), they felt pleased that it would help to make their religion known to people elsewhere.

**Q: Did you find Adventists in Madagascar deeply committed to Adventism?**

**A:** Yes indeed! To the extent that they are ready to face serious problems with their kin because of their commitment to the church.

**Q: Do Malagasy Adventists interpret the Bible any differently than their Western counterparts? Overall, are they more conservative or more liberal in their interpretation of the Bible?**

**A:** As a non-Adventist, I cannot really answer this question. I can only mention perhaps that my Adventist friends in my hometown in Switzerland, who are themselves deeply committed Adventists and who have read my book with great interest, have commented that their brothers and sisters in Madagascar seem to be much more conservative—not necessarily in a negative sense—than themselves.

**Q: Did you find areas where Adventist culture and beliefs clash with local and traditional culture and beliefs? When the two cultures diverge, which direction do the Adventists go?**

**A:** The third part of my book is dedicated to a discussion of what clashes there are and how Seventh-day Adventists deal with them. In a nutshell, one can say that the clashes concern fundamental aspects of Malagasy culture and that the Seventh-day Adventists try, as much as possible within the framework of their religion, to walk a conciliatory path. But conflict can often not be avoided.

**Q: There has been a lot of discussion about “true conversion” and how to ensure baptized Adventists actually live according to Adventist morals and beliefs. Rwanda is the example people always come back to. (And of course there are plenty of Western Adventists who lie, steal, rape, and abuse.) When push comes to shove, would Mala-**

**gasy Adventists act according to their Adventist beliefs?**

**A:** There are the problems I mentioned with non-Adventist kin. In the book I give an example of a man who insisted on not taking part at the exhumation of his own father. This is the ultimate insult toward one's kin in the eyes of the non-Adventist Malagasy. As a consequence, the man lost contact with most of his family—in a kin-based society, this is dramatic.

However, there were also people who seemed to sleep during Sabbath School or even, in a few cases, people who continued to engage with the ancestors secretly because they couldn't bear the conflict with their kin. But all in all, the Malagasy Adventists I know are deeply committed members of the church.

**Q: Are Adventist leaders in Madagascar mostly local people, or do church leaders tend to include Western missionaries or other foreigners?**

**A:** They are all Malagasy, including in the capital city of Antananarivo, where the headquarters of the Indian Ocean Division is located.

**Q: How big is the Adventist church on the island? How does it compare to other religions in Madagascar?**

**A:** In 2003, about 0.5 percent of the overall population in Madagascar was Adventist, though members are concentrated in certain areas of the island and almost absent in others. In the town where I lived, about 1 percent were Adventists, and in the village almost 10 percent. In comparison with the Catholic and the Protestant churches—to whom some 50 percent of the population of Madagascar belong—the Adventist church is tiny, but among the churches that have begun to grow only relatively recently (evangelical and Pentecostal), the Adventist church is among the largest and growing fast.

**Q: Would you say the people of Madagascar are particularly susceptible to proselytizing religions?**

**A:** I don't know, but I don't see any reason why they should be more or less so than anybody else. However, one point that might be relevant is the fact that the written word in general is considered by Malagasy people



with awe. Almost anything written has high status. This has to do with the history of Madagascar. Although this is a complicated and ambiguous issue, perhaps this specifically Malagasy perception of the written word and of books makes a church that puts emphasis on reading and studying the Bible particularly attractive.

**Q: What kind of feedback have you received on your book?**

**A:** It has been very well received among social anthropologists (there have been several very favorable reviews in important academic journals). And—what for me is in a way even more important—among members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Europe and the United States.

I also brought copies back to Madagascar to the Seventh-day Adventist headquarters in the capital, to university departments, and to my friends in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka. They were all very pleased, especially Ranala Isaac (who was the pastor in Maroantsetra when I lived there), who was enthusiastic about the book's emphasis on study and learning.

**Q: What new project are you working on now?**

**A:** I am still working in the same region in Madagascar, though on an entirely different research project. However, I continue to live with my Adventist friends when I am there. I presently study representations of nature and nature conservation in Madagascar as well as in Switzerland. ■

*The Road to Clarity* is available from Amazon.com

**Read** Adventist reviews of the *Road to Clarity*, by Stefan Hörschele, in *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 44 (autumn 2006), and by Rich Hanon in *Spectrum* on page 75, above.

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**Noteworthy**

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Adjustments to Seventh-day Adventist Church Ministries, Services, and Structures" (2006), <[http://www.adventist.org/world\\_church/commission-ministries-services-structures/cooper-reasons-for-considering.html](http://www.adventist.org/world_church/commission-ministries-services-structures/cooper-reasons-for-considering.html)>; G. R. Knight, "Organizing for Mission: The Development of the Seventh-day Adventist Organizational Structure" (2006), <[http://www.adventist.org/world\\_church/commission-ministries-services-structures/knight-organized-for-mission.pdf](http://www.adventist.org/world_church/commission-ministries-services-structures/knight-organized-for-mission.pdf)>; A. M. Rodriguez, "Ecclesiology and Reorganization: The Oneness of the Church" (2006), <[http://www.adventist.org/world\\_church/commission-ministries-services-structures/rodriguez-ecclesiology.pdf](http://www.adventist.org/world_church/commission-ministries-services-structures/rodriguez-ecclesiology.pdf)>; V. B. Parmenter, "The Flow of Ministries" (2006), <[http://www.adventist.org/world\\_church/commission-ministries-services-structures/parmenter-flow-of-ministries.pdf](http://www.adventist.org/world_church/commission-ministries-services-structures/parmenter-flow-of-ministries.pdf)>; R. Dabrowski, "World Church: Commission Begins Deliberations on Church Structures," (2006), <<http://news.adventist.org/data/2006/04/1146779381/index.html.en>>.

4. The anonymous authors of the paper on flexibility assert that no previous review of denominational structure "addressed the topic of flexibility," leading to the impression that the study team was breaking new ground. "Principles, Possibilities, and Limits of Flexibility," 2.

5. M. Ryan, "Union of Churches: An Alternative Organizational Model for the Seventh-day Adventist Church" (2006), <[http://www.adventist.org/world\\_church/commission-ministries-services-structures/Union-of-Churches-Fifth-Draft.pdf](http://www.adventist.org/world_church/commission-ministries-services-structures/Union-of-Churches-Fifth-Draft.pdf)>.

6. W. M. Hillock, "Need for Organizational Change in the Adventist Church," *Spectrum* 4 (summer 1972):24–32; R. F. Cottrell, "The Case for an Independent North American Division," *Spectrum* 13, no. 1 (1982):2–14; G. A. Fuller, "An Independent North American Division: Current Opinion at the General Conference," *Spectrum* 13, no. 1 (1982):15–21; M. Widmer, "Changing the Way We Govern Our Church," *Adventist Review*, Apr. 27, 1995, 16–21; Gary Land, "Where Did Adventist Organizational Structure Come From?" *Spectrum* 7, no. 1 (1975): 23–27; George Knight, *Organizing to Beat the Devil* (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald, 2001); M. Moore, "North American Structure and Evangelism," *Adventist Today* 12, no. 6 (2004):18–19; B. Haloviak, "Approaches to Church Reorganization," paper presented to the Commission on World Church Organization, Cchutta Springs, Georgia, March 1993.

7. H. Mintzberg, *The Structuring of Organizations: A Synthesis of Research* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979), 71; H. Simon, *Administrative Behavior*, 4th ed. (New York: Free Press, 1997), 7–9.

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