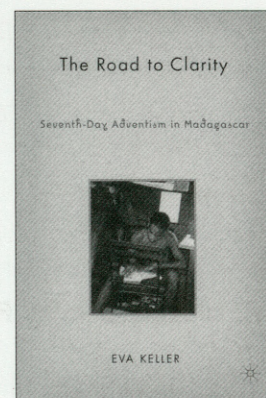


The Road to Clarity:

Seventh-day Adventism in Madagascar | REVIEWED BY RICH HANNON



From September 1998 until May 2000, Eva Keller lived in northeastern Madagascar to study the Adventist Church, or more accurately, the ordinary people who comprised the local church communities. She lived with Adventist families, first for sixteen months in Maroantsetra, a coastal district government town of twenty thousand, then for four months in Sahameloka, a village of one thousand, twenty kilometers upriver, accessible only on foot.

This fieldwork was initially in support of her dissertation, which culminated in a Ph.D. in social anthropology from the London School of Economics in 2002. It was subsequently revised to create this book.

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 is an orientation to the region and local Adventism. Part 2 tries to analyze the nature of the people's commitment to Adventism. Part 3 looks at the issues of integrating Adventism into the member's wider world.

Keller, a non-Adventist, wanted to understand what might motivate someone to devote so much time to Adventism, to see what they would find attractive. The Introduction begins with a story of her accompanying members on a proselytizing weekend. Sabbath evening, after a long day of visiting and conducting services, she observed a young man intently studying his Bible, by candlelight, for three and one-half hours. What underlying, motivating passion would produce such involvement? The book's title attempts to embody her conclusion. She writes:

The central question this book addresses concerns the nature of the attraction of Seventh-day Adventism for church members in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka. The answer to this question, in a nutshell, is that it is the intellectual excitement linked to the process of studying the Bible that is the key to local people's commitment to the Adventist church... Bible study is perceived by the local Adventists to be the road to clarity. (179)

As you might expect, there is considerable sociology, anthropology, and historical background found in the book. But the question I would raise is this: why might an educated, westernized Adventist find a book like this to be sufficiently interesting to actually read it? It is likely that many of us would have, at best, only a passing interest in anthropology, and even less interest in Madagascar. Yes, it is a book concerned with Adventism, but in a context few of us are likely to confront. So what might we gain by spending time reading it? Life is busy enough.

I can only respond to that question personally, but I think my answer might apply to others also. This book, which examines Adventism an inch wide and a mile deep in a radically unfamiliar context, has much to say to me about Adventism universally. It helps me understand what parts seem successfully to transcend culture and what parts fail. That is valuable.

Adventism is a worldwide church surprisingly monolithic in its implementation. Reading this book and also being a thoroughly acculturated Adventist, I was struck with how inflexibly at times an American-rooted church has tried to plant itself into such non-American soil. We find unions, conferences, churches, and companies. There are Pathfinders, Sabbath School (even with the little bell rung to terminate lesson study), tithe envelopes, colporteur, and Morning Watch books.

Sometimes, familiar church programs and materials are instantiated there in ways that don't always fit and can have ridiculous results. For example:

Because the text of every Study Guide is, in literally translated versions, exactly the same around the world, it is inevitable that some lessons are, at least in part, inappropriate for readers in places like Sahameloka or Maroantsetra. On June 16, 1999, for example, it remained a complete mystery to everyone present in church, what on earth was to be understood by the term "New Age," upon which the day's lesson was based and which it criti-

cized, but which I, being asked to explain this bizarre expression, could only partly succeed in clarifying. Moreover, the Study Guide is obviously not produced for readers with little formal education. Given the fact that most church members today live in countries of the Third World, this is rather surprising. However, the Adventists in Sahameloka and Maroantsetra never failed to make the text meaningful for themselves by concentrating on those passages to which they could relate. (87)

Or consider how colporteur works:

[A] dozen members of the Adventist church in Maroantsetra town were employed by the church as professional door-to-door booksellers.... [P]ractically all of these books were written in French, which most of those who sold them, and I guess many of those who bought them, could not read at all.... These books are primarily produced for European readers and concern such things as healthy nutrition.... But to the people in Maroantsetra, the recipes presented would not make much sense even if they could read them, nor would they have the required ingredients—muesli, strawberries, fresh vegetables, soya milk—to prepare them....

The prize book for both sellers and potential buyers was a massive French Catholic Bible with golden page edges and rich in colorful illustrations of popes and cathedrals. I was extremely surprised that the Adventist church would distribute a Catholic Bible that glorifies the papacy.... This Bible cost the equivalent of a civil servant's monthly salary.... It was everyone's dream, including the members of the Adventist church, to own such a Bible.... The purpose of buying any of these books is quite clearly possession and display. In fact people sometimes bought books that were still wrapped up in plastic solely on the basis of descriptions of what was to be found inside. (139–41)

It is also interesting that this desire for "display literature" stands in sharp contrast to how Adventist members use their study Bibles. Those books are worn from use and appear to be viewed instrumentally rather than as reverential objects in themselves.

However, more interesting than misapplication is where the church seems to have gotten it right. Keller discusses and extensively documents how members are excited by their study. The nondogmatic climate stimulates idea exchange and excitement from shaping a world rich with meaning:

Seventh-day Adventist practice in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka is of a distinctly Socratic nature. I chose the expression Socratic,

because Bible study is aimed at understanding biblical truth through reflection and dialogue, rather than encouraging the consumption of ready-made doctrine.... In every context I was able to observe, Bible study was of a dialogical, discursive and participatory nature, and involved much intellectual engagement and critical thinking for those taking part. And indeed, it seems to be the very activity of studying and learning, which fascinates and interests local church members, and which gives them pleasure, perhaps even more so than the answers they get from studying. Whenever I asked any of them what they liked about the Adventist church, their answers were saturated with the word "to study" (mianatra). (114)

The worldview of the Adventist members Keller lived with is, as might be expected, one that takes the Bible as completely literal and normative. Consequently, you get "clarity" upon correct understanding. This provides meaning but is also a limiting factor:

With time, I became knowledgeable about the basic facts of Adventist doctrine, and familiar with Adventist practice. And the people who taught me noticed my growing expertise with delight.... In fact some people observed that I knew more about Adventist teachings than many members of the church. However, I did not get baptized, and this puzzled many of my Adventist friends.... They would inquire: "Is there anything which is not clear to you yet, anything that you haven't understood?"... The only reason they could think of for my not getting baptized, despite the fact that I had obviously acquired sufficient knowledge of the Bible, was that something must not be clear to me.... Nobody ever asked me whether I perhaps did not accept as true what I had learnt. (120)

This mindset of "once you know what the Bible says you inevitably should convert" resembles the way evangelism proceeded universally not too long ago. Adventism has struggled with how to reach people who no longer walk the philosophical ground Keller found in Madagascar. She didn't convert, in part, because her world was more complicated and the motivations provided her by the local church members were inadequate for that world.

Vicariously visiting an Adventism planted in such a different culture felt, for me, a bit like Alice might have felt in *Through the Looking Glass*. But I was well rewarded by the insights I hopefully gained into my own church experience. ■

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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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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>.

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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