



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 Sabameloka. 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 Sabameloka 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 Sabameloka 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 colporteurism 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 Sabameloka 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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