THE ROAD TO CLARITY
The Road to Clarity
Seventh-Day Adventism in Madagascar

Eva Keller
In Memory of Bodo
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Note on the Pronunciation of Malagasy Words

The dialect spoken in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka contains numerous velar nasals. Following other studies of coastal populations of Madagascar, among whom this sound is common, I spell it as /ñ/ (pronounced as in English “long”). Written /o/ is pronounced [u], written /ô/ is pronounced [o]. Written /tr/ is pronounced something like [tchr], thus Maroantsetra is pronounced [Maruantséetchr].
Glossary

andafy  any country other than Madagascar
fady  taboo
fabaizana (see mahay)  knowledge/power, potency
finoana (see mino)  trust in, acceptance of, belief in
fomban-drazana  ancestral custom
havana  kin (both matri- and patrilateral)
lôbôlo  lay leader of Adventist church
mahay (see fabaizana)  to know, to be powerful/capable
mazava  clear, light
minatra  to study, to learn
mino (see finoana)  to trust in, to accept, to believe in
mpiara-mivavaka  members of the same church; here used to refer to fellow Seventh-day Adventists
ray aman-dreny  parent, elder, senior person
    (literally: “father and mother”)
tanindrazana  land of the ancestors, home
vazaha  all (especially White) non-Malagasy people

Examples of Teknonyms

Papan’ i Beby  Beby’s dad
Maman’ i Claude  Claude’s mum
Maman-dRakoto  Rakoto’s mum
Acknowledgments

Any ethnographic study is made possible, above all, by the local people among whom fieldwork is conducted. I wish to thank first of all, therefore, the people of Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, to whom I feel particularly indebted. Those with whom I lived, as well as many others, knew that I was going to write a book about them, and they felt proud that their names would appear in it. Because of this, it would be inappropriate to disguise people’s real identities, or change the names of fieldwork locations, as is often done in anthropology for the sake of privacy and, sometimes, protection.

My host family in Maroantsetra, with whom I have been friends since my first visit to Madagascar in 1987, introduced me to Seventh-day Adventism and looked after me, in every sense, from the beginning to the end of my fieldwork. For this I am deeply grateful. Papan’i Beby (Dimilahy Maurice) was my teacher, Maman’i Beby (Rasoamalala Arlette) my most intimate friend, their children Kiki (Dimilahy Crispin Odilon) and Beby (Razafindratelo Beatrice Adorée) my little brother and sister. The four of them feel like family, and I hope they feel the same about me.

In Maroantsetra, I also wish to thank many other people not all of whom I can mention here by name. In particular I would like to thank Pastor Ranala Isaac who was always extremely helpful, as well as his wife Lalao Alexandrine. Maman’i Ominò (Zandry Marie Laure) took me along on many of her church-related activities in and around town, and became a good friend. And so did Mandina Eleonore Laurent who helped me understand conversations that I had recorded.

In Sahameloka I lived with a family whom I had not previously known. In spite of this they welcomed me into their household and let me take part in their daily lives. For their hospitality and generosity, I am deeply grateful to Papan’i Claude (Dahy Justin), Maman’i Claude (Mahefa Claire), Claude (Mahefa Claudien) and Mazavatiana; for their tolerance toward a bizarre intruder, I must also express thanks to the two little boys of the family, Mezaquei and Ezakela.
The father of Maman’ i Claude (Mahefa) and her brother Papan’ i Emilie (Bemanively) were also very welcoming.

Many members of the village’s Adventist congregation have become not only invaluable informants, but also close friends. Among them, Papan’ i Fredel (Bemitompo Christoph), Maman’ i Fredel (Soazafy Martine), Papan’ and Maman’ i Vangé (Joseph and Maritime), Maman’ and Papan’ i Silivie (Feno Terrine and Vintice), Papan’ and Maman’ i Filiette (Fulgence and Zoralette) and Maman’ and Papan’ i Relien (Noline and Aumat). Outside of church circles my research also greatly benefited from the help of many people in Sahameloka, in particular Claudine, who was my companion in non-Adventist spaces. The late Jaonarison and Ranto Felix, as well as Ravelonavy and Jao Robert were my teachers of village history.

It was the open-mindedness and open-heartedness of all the people mentioned by name, along with many others, that made the project of learning about Seventh-day Adventism in Madagascar not only possible, but also enjoyable. I feel deeply indebted to them for this.

In Antananarivo, I wish to acknowledge the help of Matthew Hatchwell from the Wildlife Conservation Society as well as Razafiarivony Michel from the University of Antananarivo (Musée d’Art et d’Archéologie). Michel not only organized my research visa and proof-read my Malagasy transcriptions, he was also an anchor in an unfamiliar city. I would also like to acknowledge the cooperation of the Musée d’Art et d’Archéologie and to thank the Seventh-day Adventist headquarters in Antananarivo for providing useful information.

A first version of my research results was presented as a Ph.D. thesis at the London School of Economics (LSE) (2002). At the LSE, many people, both staff and postgraduate peers, have contributed toward the development of the argument as it is presented in this book, in particular Johnny Parry and Fenella Cannell as well as Luke Freeman. I would also like to thank Bob Hefner whose review of an earlier draft of this book included many helpful suggestions, as well as Joel Robbins for a number of useful comments. I also thank Oliver Woolley, who copy edited the manuscript and has helped to remove non-native speaker clumsiness in my writing.

The research on which this book is based was funded by several institutions and individuals in Europe. In Switzerland, I wish to express my gratitude to the Janggen-Pöhn Stiftung in St. Gallen, which provided generous financial aid, and to my friend Christian Suter who lent me money when I needed it. In Britain, my research was supported by the Overseas Research Student Award Scheme, as well as the Department of Social Anthropology at the LSE.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

(Alfred Gell Memorial Studentship). I also received a grant from the Central Research Fund of the University of London and the Royal Anthropological Institute (Sutasoma Award). I express my thanks to all these institutions and individuals.

I would also like to thank my family (and many friends in different countries) for their support over many years of study and for having faith in my future as an anthropologist.

Together with the people of Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, my greatest debt is to Maurice Bloch, one of my Ph.D. supervisors at the LSE. When I returned from fieldwork, I carried with me ten kilos of handwritten notes. These represented the seedling out of which the present book grew. While I often failed to envisage what might come out of it, Maurice saw its potential from the very beginning, and he helped me to develop the argument over the course of many years. He shared my enthusiasm for the project from the beginning to the end and provided dedicated advice right up until publication. His input has been an invaluable intellectual inspiration. His deep empathy for people, including the Seventh-day Adventists he got to know when he visited me in Maroantsetra, represents, for me, an anthropologist’s most important quality.

I would like to express equal thanks to Rita Astuti. She, too, has not only been a dedicated supervisor, she has also provided continual support in ways that went far beyond the call of duty. I have always admired her ability to never lose sight of the real people anthropologists write about. Rita’s particular strengths, her careful examination of ethnographic evidence, and her clear thinking free of empty jargon, have greatly contributed to the quality of my argument.

I am deeply grateful to both Maurice Bloch and Rita Astuti. If there is any merit in this book, it is, I feel, at least partly due to the fact that I have had the very best of teachers.

I dedicate this study to the memory of Bodo Raoseta, with whom I discovered Madagascar on my first visit in 1987. Bodo tragically died at the age of 20, a year after I had left.
Certain philosophers have argued that a statement is true if, and only if, words correspond to the actual state of the world. Making true propositions, therefore, involves matching words to world. The Malagasy Adventists, to whom Keller introduces us with such warmth, clarity and sympathy, would probably agree with this general idea, except that, for them, the problem is reversed. They first take for granted that certain words, those in the Bible, are true and that it therefore follows, if the Bible is categorically true, and, if truth is a matter of matching world to word, the word can be used as a tool for discovering what the world is like.

After all, the claim that the Bible is categorically true is taken for granted in Madagascar by all those whom the inhabitants of Maroantsetra and Sahameloka are likely to come into contact with, even those who belong to no church at all, but especially by those who everybody recognizes as educated, be they government officials, church dignitaries, or those self-appointed experts from, and of, the outside world, the missionaries. The claim that the Bible is true is, therefore, nothing unusual. What characterizes the Adventists is their determination to take the implications of the truth of the Bible into their own hands, so to speak, by, first of all, choosing a church different from the ones they would automatically slip into.

There is, however, much more to this determination than merely the initial act of picking a particular sect and then accepting its authority. Keller shows us how the Malagasy Adventists are drawn by their religion into participating in a continuous and exciting scientific inquiry about what things are really like. This is ultimately because such searching will be a help in understanding the Bible, which, for them, already contains an account of the truths they will discover through their own efforts. However, because the Bible is difficult to decipher, it can be decoded with the help of empirical means. This is because, for these Adventists, the world is rather like a crib, to be used by an incompetent schoolboy, as a means of understanding a text that
he does not yet fully master. Studying the world is thus studying the Bible by other means. For the Malagasy Adventists, religion and science are two sides of the same coin.

In fact, the implications of such an intellectual attitude are radical and they make this book exceptionally important for understanding what is happening on the religious front in countries such as Madagascar and many other parts of the world. These implications should also make us reconsider one of the major theoretical trends in the anthropology of religion during, at least, the last 50 years.

Anthropology, as an academic subject, developed toward the end of the nineteenth century in the wake of enthusiasm from social scientists for the Darwinian view of man. Within this context, featuring the famous debates between Darwinians such as Thomas Huxley and the representatives of various churches, religion and science were understood to be competitors, or alternatives. This led to numerous attempts by various anthropologists, most notably Tylor and Frazer, and also many others, to want to characterize the epistemological differences between science and religion and, usually, to see the latter as the forerunner of the former. This is hardly surprising. Religion, as it was presented in these debates, and beyond, was a matter of very precise assertions about the origin of the world and of species, among many other propositions concerned with the reality of the world. Darwinian science offered competing claims about those very same facts.

The fight between these two incompatible alternatives could have been a struggle to the death but, partly out of cowardice, and, partly because of expediency, most establishment theologians and scientists in many European countries, especially in Britain, tacitly negotiated a kind of unwritten nonaggression pact, only breached by a few ill-bred and awkward characters. After all, once their little quarrel was over, scientists and bishops coming, as they did, from the same social milieu had to sit side by side and sip their port in such institutions as Oxbridge colleges.

This genteel disengagement had radical implications for both science and religion. On the religious side, it led to a gradual redefinition of what religion is. The religious establishment in the main churches gradually soft pedaled, or abandoned, cosmological claims and, instead, claimed as central to religion, elements that were certainly not new, but had previously been the concern of only a few. As a result of such a mood, religion became more Jansenist, it became represented as a matter of the heart, its scriptures and rituals were seen as metaphorical and allusive and as using symbols, whose significance would ultimately always escape vulgar attempts at definition. Religion was a matter of experience and of inner light.
This shift in the claims of religion is intriguingly also manifest in anthropological theory, especially British anthropological theory, which was to dominate the anthropology of religion in much of the twentieth century. By the 1950s, anthropologists were beginning to be grudgingly accepted into the older academic establishment and they were, for the most part, eager to blend in. Most famously, Evans-Pritchard, newly installed in All Souls Oxford, inspired by what was to become an open commitment to Roman Catholicism, thus denounced what he had called the “intellectualist” character of the work of writers such as Tylor and Frazer, largely because they had mistakenly thought religion was a proto-science. Instead, he, and very soon his followers, produced a number of famous studies of African religions. Thus, he presented Nuer religion as about an undefined and indefinable “divine,” which could only be intuitively understood by those, who like himself, had been touched by grace and had read a number of fashionable theologians. Lienhardt told us Dinka religion was a matter of inner experience. Turner explained Ndembu symbols as combining emotions and meaning in beautiful, but forever inexhaustible, mysteries.

Thus, as the Christian churches were retreating from specific claims about what the world is like, anthropologists, with very few notable exceptions, such as Horton, were telling us that religion had never been about this kind of propositions. In other words, the Africans had always been, in spirit at least, post-Darwinian genteel Christians.

What makes this book so exciting is that it offers a fundamental and documented challenge to this understanding by the mainstream churches and by anthropologists of what religion involves. The challenge comes directly from the people Keller makes us understand so well through her ethnographic skill. They seem to be saying to the mainstream churches something along the following lines: “When your missionaries came to Madagascar, you told us about things which we had got wrong or did not know, about God and Jesus, where he was born and the exact date when he was born, about how the world was created, about what would happen to us after death, where Egypt was, who was the father of David and so on. Now, however, you don’t seem all that sure about any of these things yourselves and you seem to avoid giving us straight answers when we ask. So, as you don’t seem to be able to be clear, we will go somewhere else, to a church, the Adventists in this case, who are as clear as you once were. We want to know what is true and what is not. In other words, we want a church like the one that faced Thomas Huxley. Perhaps all these other things about faith and experience and symbols are all very true, but we also want to know (science).”
The skill of the author of this book not only makes us understand the point of view of the people who are saying these things, but also enables us to have a great deal of intellectual sympathy for them. Furthermore, through this ability to make us espouse their standpoint, if only for a moment, she thereby makes us rethink anthropological theories of religion, especially the contemptuous dismissal, by such anthropologists as Evans-Pritchard, of those whom he called the “intellectualists.” He told us that those benighted Victorian writers did not understand that religion, from the believers’ point of view, was something quite different from science, that these authors were being grossly ethnocentric in projecting the debates of their time onto people who were concerned with something quite other. But what the Malagasy Adventists are saying is that what they see as lacking in the mainstream churches is precisely that these are not scientific enough, and that what they like about Adventism is that it is a religion that is clear about what it claims the world to be like. Indeed they go further, and this is what makes this book riveting, they don’t just want to know science, they want to be like true scientists, that is, to be given tools with which to investigate empirical reality, whatever the problems and the suffering this might involve. The search for the truth about the world is for them what religion is.

Now, of course, there is no reason to think that in this definition of religion they are any more right than were Evans-Pritchard or Tylor. This is because most anthropologists are, by now, resigned to recognizing that trying to construct an essentialist definition of religion is a futile enterprise. At best, the term religion can, in some way, indicate a loose association of phenomena that only have in common the trivial feature of reminding us of what the English word has come to mean at this point in time. However, the Malagasy of this book are surely perfectly justified in telling us that Adventism resembles what the missionaries had once declared was “religion,” that this is what they like, and that what they get from it is similar to the kind of thing, which that equally difficult word “science” evokes for English speakers.

As a result, the bizarre modus vivendi reached in twentieth century Europe between the scientific and the religious factions of the intellectual middle classes, which was imported into anthropology by Evans-Pritchard, probably so as not to be thought a vulgarian by his college colleagues, is, simply, not one of the concerns of the Malagasy Adventists. They reject the churches that are influenced by it and, in order to understand what they want, we must follow Tylor, Horton and Keller and recognize their intellectualism as central.

Maurice Bloch