

**The search for knowledge  
among the Seventh-day Adventists  
in the area of Maroantsetra, Madagascar**

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## **Abstract**

The thesis is an ethnographic inquiry into the nature of Seventh-day Adventism in Maroantsetra, a small town on the northeast coast of Madagascar, and Sahameloka, a nearby village.

The Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka do not participate in traditional practices through which local people communicate with their ancestors, because they consider such practices to be the work of the devil. This is highly significant in the context of Madagascar and causes serious tension between Adventist and non-Adventist kin. The thesis examines whether the members of the church form a discrete community, but finds that they remain firmly embedded in existing kinship networks despite the difficulties involved.

The main body of the thesis is concerned with the nature of the commitment of local church members to Seventh-day Adventism. It is argued that the core of their commitment, and what they value most, is the practice of Bible study and the pleasure which derives from that activity. Moreover, it is suggested that Adventist Bible study is similar to certain aspects of scientific practice. The thesis further examines the ways in which Bible study is conceptually linked to an image of clarity, an image of dis-covering the truth from beneath Satan's many deceptions and of acquiring a clear vision of reality.

In conclusion, it is argued that while other studies of phenomena labelled 'religious fundamentalism' have tried to understand what kinds of people join movements such as Seventh-day Adventism, and why they do so, insufficient attention has been paid to the nature of converts' commitment beyond initial conversion. Finally, it is suggested that Seventh-day Adventism in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka does not correspond to the modern concept of Christianity based on belief as an inner state.



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in memory of Bodo

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*All photographs were taken by the author between 1998 and 2000.*

### **Note on the orthography 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 sounds is common, I have spelt it as /ñ/ (local people also spell it as /gn/).

In official Malagasy language, spoken [u] is spelt /o/. For example loholona (head of people) is pronounced [luhuluna]. However, in the area of Maroantsetra, the vowel /o/ is mostly pronounced as a closed [o], which I have spelt as /ô/. Thus in the local dialect, loholona, for example, becomes lôhôlo, pronounced [loholu].

## Acknowledgements

Any ethnographic study is made possible, above all others, by the local people among whom fieldwork is conducted. Therefore, I wish to thank first of all those people in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, to whom I feel particularly indebted. Those with whom I lived, and many others, knew that I was going to write a 'book' about them, and I think they felt proud that their names would appear in it. For this reason, it would have been inappropriate to disguise people's real identities, or change the names of 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 all matters, from the beginning to the end of my fieldwork for which I am deeply grateful. Papan' i Beby (Dimilahy Maurice) was my teacher, Maman' i Beby (Arlette Rasoamalala David) my most intimate friend, their children Kiki (Dimilahy Chrispin Odilon) and Beby (Beatrice Adorée Razafindratelo) my little brother and sister. To me, the four of them feel like family, and I hope I do to them as well.

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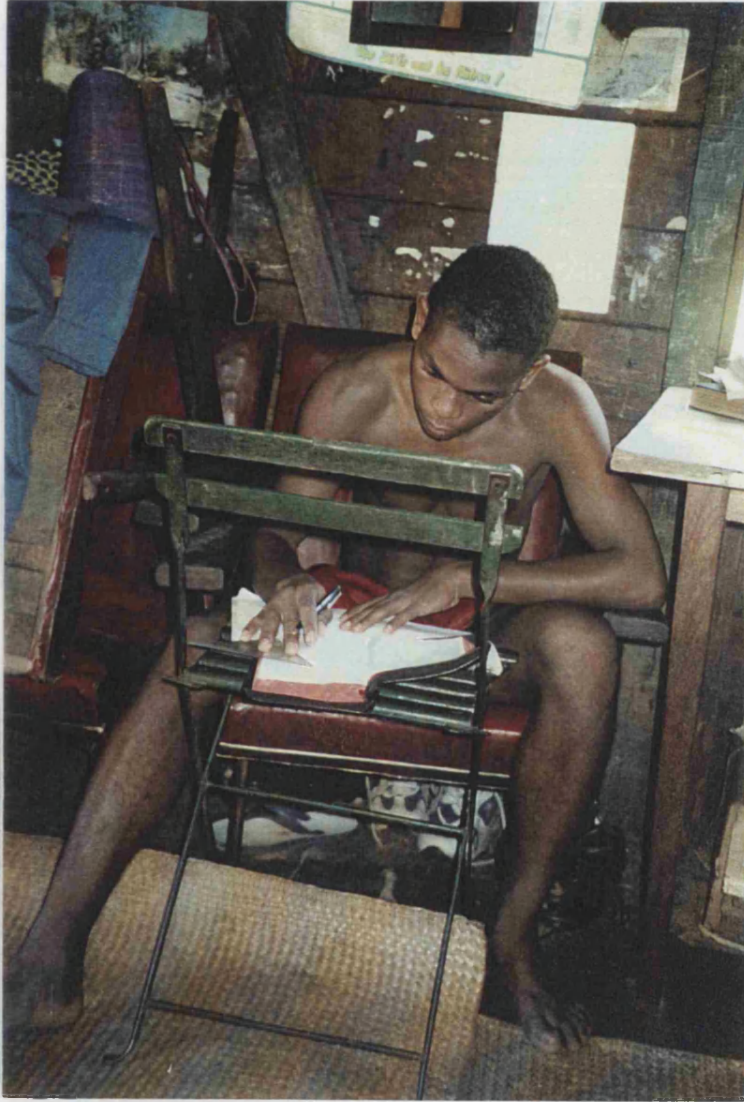
Together with the people of Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, my greatest debt is to my supervisors Maurice Bloch and Rita Astuti. When I returned from fieldwork, I carried with me ten kilos of handwritten notes. These were the seedling out of which the present thesis grew. While I often failed to envisage what might come out of it, Maurice Bloch saw its potential from the very beginning, and he nurtured it with great care till it became a fully grown plant. He shared my enthusiasm for the project from the beginning to the end and provided dedicated advice to the last minute. His input has not only been an invaluable intellectual inspiration, but his deep empathy for people, including the Seventh-day Adventists he got to know when he visited me in Maroantsetra, has been and remains the model of an anthropologist to me.

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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 twenty, a year after I had left Madagascar.





## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### Outline

The anthropology of Madagascar has concentrated on the nature of ancestors and the ambiguous relationship between living and dead kin. Whatever the specific perspective or theoretical position of individual authors, the presence of the ancestors is ubiquitous, and in this the literature reflects the reality of life in Madagascar. The ancestors figure in people's past, present and future lives as they do in past, present and, most likely, future writings on Madagascar.

This study, although about Madagascar, is *not* about the ancestors. Rather, it is about a group of Malagasy people who explicitly reject, and do not participate in, practices which involve communicating with the dead, and who interpret traditions relating to the ancestors in a radically different way to the wider society in which they are embedded.

The subjects of this thesis are the Seventh-Day-Adventists in two locations: in Maroantsetra, a small town on the northeast coast of Madagascar, and in the nearby village of Sahameloka. In contrast to many other studies on contemporary forms of Christianity in Africa and elsewhere, I am less concerned with the causes of conversion, but rather with the nature, and indeed the pleasure, of involvement in the practice of Adventist religion.

Soon after arriving in the field, I was confronted with what seemed to me to be a puzzle. According to Seventh-day Adventist doctrine the 'ancestors' are real. It is true that people prosper as a result of 'ancestral blessing', and that the 'ancestors' have the power to strike their living descendants with misfortune, illness and death if they are displeased with them. But: it is not really the *ancestors* who either cause prosperity or misfortune, it is the Devil in disguise. Thus a crucial aspect of commitment to the Adventist church in Madagascar is to stop engaging in those practices which involve communicating with the dead, since that would be equivalent to invoking the Devil. In the region of Maroantsetra, this primarily means not attending, participating in, or

contributing towards either exhumations or cattle sacrifice, the two most important rituals in this area of Madagascar.

Because the ancestors are so much at the core of what we understand about Malagasy society, refusing to communicate with them by actually withdrawing from, among other practices, exhumation and sacrifice, seems extremely difficult and problematic. Yet this is precisely what the Seventh-Day-Adventists do.

As a result of the requirement to leave the ancestors behind when joining the church, the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka place themselves in a very difficult position, in particular vis-a-vis their non-Adventist kin who are often at a loss to understand, and find it very difficult to accept, the Adventists' non-participation in exhumation and cattle sacrifice. As a result, becoming a Seventh-day Adventist has severe social consequences. These can range from covert tension among kin, to open conflict and, in rare cases, to disinheritance of members of the Adventist church. The degree of conflict depends on a number of aspects, but there is no doubt that joining the Adventist church carries the potential of provoking serious trouble.

It seemed obvious to me that – given the radical nature of what people do when they join the Adventist church – they must surely have very strong reasons that make them willing to accept the social costs involved in becoming Adventists. At the same time, I could not see what the members of the church were gaining, or what they hoped to gain, by doing so. Neither did any material advantages such as free medical care result from membership of the church, as has sometimes been suggested of similar movements elsewhere in Africa. Nor did becoming an Adventist seem to lead to any symbolic or social advantages, or other desirable changes in people's lives.

Thus I asked myself: What do the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka get out of being church members, other than trouble? What do they find in their involvement in the church which is valuable enough for them to make them willing to put up with trouble, conflict and sometimes marginalisation? It was these questions which stimulated my research. In an attempt to answer them, this study is dedicated to understanding the nature of the attraction Adventism holds for people in the area of Maroantsetra and the nature of their commitment to Seventh-day Adventist practice and thought. The thesis is structured as follows.

The introduction provides the necessary background information to the ethnography which follows. It gives an overview of two sets of relevant literature (sections 2 and 5), and briefly discusses the history of Christianity in Madagascar and especially in the area of Maroantsetra, as well as providing background information on Seventh-day Adventism globally and locally.

Part One begins with a description of both my fieldsites and its inhabitants (chapter 2). In chapter 3, I proceed to introduce the members of the Seventh-day Adventist congregations in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, and then move inside the Seventh-day Adventist church to discuss its internal structure with regard to issues of authority and participation (chapter 4). Chapters 5 and 6 analyse people's involvement in the Adventist church within the context of their social environment and existing social networks; the issue of kinship is discussed in detail (chapter 6).

In Part Two, I explore the nature of the religious practices church members are involved in, and discuss important concepts related to these practices. Chapter 7 concerns the devil, and chapter 8 discusses the impact the image of the devil has on Seventh-day Adventist conceptualisations of ancestral tradition. The following two chapters contain the core of the argument of the thesis and the ethnography which forms the basis of the overall conclusions which I explicate in chapter 12. Chapter 9 offers a detailed description of the Seventh-day Adventist practice of Bible study, and chapter 10 analyses – in four parts discussing different, yet related issues – the significance of the notion of knowledge for church members in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka. In chapter 11, I discuss the issue of the significance of attitudes to literacy for Seventh-day Adventist religious practice in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka. The conclusion weaves together the different strands discussed in the foregoing chapters, challenges some widely held views about 'fundamentalist' religions, and tries to answer what kind of 'religion' we have been dealing with.

The terms 'Adventist' and 'Seventh-day Adventist' are used interchangeably throughout this thesis. Unless specified, I refer to both Maroantsetra town and the village of Sahameloka when talking about 'the Adventists' or 'the Seventh-day Adventists'.

Quotations from taped conversations, of which I have the exact transcription, are cited in “double inverted commas”. Statements taken from my fieldnotes based on memory I cite ‘in single inverted commas’.

### **Fieldwork methods**

Fieldwork among Seventh-day Adventist congregations was conducted for nineteen months between September 1998 and May 2000 (interrupted by two months back in Europe a year into fieldwork). During the first year, I stayed with a Seventh-day Adventist family in Maroantsetra town whom I had known from a previous visit to Madagascar in 1987, and with whom I had kept in touch throughout all these years<sup>1</sup>. It was in fact our acquaintance (which I see as the outcome of chance, but which they see as part of God’s plan) which made me choose this particular area of Madagascar as my fieldsite, and which made me study Seventh-day Adventism, a religion I had previously not had any contact with and about which I knew absolutely nothing. As will undoubtedly become clear in the course of my text, I owe a great deal of the insight I was able to gain into the phenomenon of Adventism in this area of Madagascar to my host family and in particular to Papan’ i Beby (literally: Beby’s dad, people in this region use teknonyms<sup>2</sup>) who was my first and in a sense my most important teacher in Seventh-day Adventism during the time I lived with him and his family.

During the last six months of fieldwork I lived for the most part in the village of Sahameloka. There too I stayed with members of the Seventh-day Adventist church. Unlike my host family in town, I did not know my host family in Sahameloka before arriving in the village, although they had often seen me at district meetings of the

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<sup>1</sup> I rented a small Malagasy house in the neighbourhood of my host family where I slept and where I retreated in order to write fieldnotes, read or translate recorded material with my assistant. But I spent most of the day at the house of my host family and always ate with them.

<sup>2</sup> The members of a nuclear family in Maroantsetra do not share one common family name, but everyone has their individual first name and surname, and parents are basically free to call their children whatever they like. Mostly though, surnames reflect kinship connections. Beby, the fifteen-year old girl of my host family in Maroantsetra for example, is called Beby Razafindratelo which means ‘The grandchild of Telolahy (her paternal grandfather)’, while Kiki, Beby’s older brother is called Dimilahy like their father. Claude, the eldest son of my host family in Sahameloka in contrast has been given his maternal grandfather’s name as a surname. His siblings, like many other people in the village, do not have a surname at all. In daily address, however, one always uses teknonyms as a matter of respect. And people of childbearing age who do not have any children are mostly addressed as ‘aunt of so and so’ or similar kin terms.

Adventist church in Maroantsetra, so they told me, and knew exactly who I was before we ever met. Since my host family in Sahameloka owned a house which actually had four rooms separated by curtains (unlike most people's houses which are just one room of about 3x4 metres), they generously gave me one of them which I only had to share with some of their rice. Although to them, the idea of a person having a room more or less to themselves was rather bizarre, they soon understood that I was different in this respect and they did their best to give me the space I seemed to need. I will introduce both my host families in chapter 3.

Throughout my stay in Sahameloka, I went back to Maroantsetra from time to time and spent a few days there in order to keep in touch with my host family and other friends and informants.

The principal method of data collection was participant observation in the two households in which I lived. Apart from sharing my host families' daily lives, this involved participating in their religious activities both at home and in church. Both families knew that I was not an Adventist myself and that I had not come to be converted, but to study Adventism. This did not bother them at all, but on the contrary seemed to motivate them to explain to me what Adventism was all about, partly perhaps in the hope that I would also become a member, and partly because they liked the idea of the Adventist message getting spread by my writing a book about them, as I had explained I was planning to.

With people other than my two host families, i.e. people with whom I did not have the same close relationship, I largely resorted – besides paying them casual visits and just chatting to them about this and that – to semi-focussed interviews about particular aspects I was interested in. These conversations I recorded and then translated into English with the help of a Malagasy assistant (a non-Adventist friend of mine from Maroantsetra) who clarified and explained those passages which I could not understand properly.

Perhaps the most significant limit of my data lies in the fact that I was not able to have as close a relationship as I wished with members of the Seventh-day Adventist church other than my host families. This was mainly due to the fact that both of them strongly resented my establishing close ties with people other than themselves, a point I will discuss in some detail in chapter 6. However, I came to know many other people.

While it was impossible to become friends with all members of the church in Maroantsetra (partly because of their number, partly because of pragmatic difficulties of keeping in touch, partly because of the specific position of my host family within the church and in town), their smaller number in Sahameloka enabled me to get to know and to establish good relations with all of them.

Also, I did not isolate myself from the rest of society, but also spent considerable time with people who had nothing to do with Adventism; and it was they who took me to see practices such as exhumation and sacrifice of which the Seventh-day Adventists disapprove, but which I felt I needed to understand in order to contextualize their experience and situation. Moving in and out of the Seventh-day Adventist community, though not entirely unproblematic, was not as difficult as I had anticipated. This was largely due to the fact that the members of the church themselves do not live in isolation from their non-Adventist kin or neighbours, as I will discuss in detail in chapter 6.

The difference between fieldwork in a town and fieldwork in a village is striking in terms of what kind of data a single researcher such as myself is able to gather. As will become obvious in the course of chapter 2, I have much more detailed ethnography of the internal structure of the village of Sahameloka and of how everyone is related to each other than I have of Maroantsetra town. However, this thesis is not an ethnography of either Maroantsetra town or Sahameloka; it is primarily an ethnography of the Seventh-day Adventist communities in both places. In this respect living in town proved very useful and informative, because it enabled me to observe the activities in the district's Adventist centre, as well as the relationship between Adventist congregations in town and in the countryside.



## The anthropology of Madagascar

As I have already mentioned, the ancestors have played an extremely prominent role in the anthropology of Madagascar<sup>3</sup>. There is hardly any study of a Malagasy society which does not, in some way or another, deal with the relationship between the living and the dead. However, this relationship is not always easy. Malagasy ancestors are of an essentially ambiguous nature, and this ambiguity is reflected in the development of the anthropology of Madagascar.



Map 1. Madagascar  
(in: Ellis 1985: 5)

<sup>3</sup> Feeley-Harnik (1984) however has argued that the preoccupation of the Sakalava of western Madagascar with their ancestors may in fact be a rather recent phenomenon (going back some 150 years) which developed as a reaction against Merina rule and, later on, colonial policies. Feeley-Harnik suggests that the only way the Sakalava kings were able to survive in the face of the loss of their political power as living rulers, was by going 'underground', as it were, and ruling their subjects as ancestors.



Maurice Bloch, in particular in his work on the Merina of highland Madagascar (see for example Bloch 1994a [1971], 1986, 1989a), has focused on ancestral blessing (*tsodrano*) as a source of life. He has discussed in great detail the notion of the ideal ancestral order and its ritual creation in the face of the human condition of mortality. Bloch has shown how the image of the ancestral order legitimises the authority of elders, and he has discussed how Merina people willingly participate in the ritual creation of this image because the ancestors are perceived to be the source of blessing and thus of health, prosperity and fertility for *all* of their descendants<sup>4</sup>.

The significance of the ancestors' blessing and protection for the prosperity of their descendants is unchallenged and has been confirmed and illustrated by almost every anthropologist of Madagascar I can think of. However, recent ethnographies (in particular Graeber 1995 [but see Graeber 2001: 232-239], Astuti 1995 and Cole 2001) have focused on the other side of the ambiguous nature of Malagasy ancestors discussing how they are not only a source of blessing, but also a problem. As these ethnographies show, it is often difficult for living people to fulfill the demands of the ancestors, because these constrain people's actions, movements, possibilities and pleasures in life. Hence, in an attempt to square their own desires and needs with those of the ancestors, the living and the dead enter into a dynamic process by which they *negotiate* their respective demands and desires.

Cole discusses this process of negotiation between the ancestors and their descendants as it takes place during cattle sacrifice in her ethnography of a group of southern Betsimisaraka on Madagascar's east coast a few hundred kilometres south of Maroantsetra. She shows for example how, during the ritual process, the Betsimisaraka accommodate or remove certain taboos (*fady*) which were imposed on them by their ancestors, but which have become too difficult to keep. At the same time, the consent of the ancestors to the changes proposed by the living is sought through the very same ritual process (Cole 2001, especially chapter 6, also Cole 1997).

I have taken Bloch's and Cole's work to *represent* an ambiguity which is present throughout the anthropology of Madagascar; and indeed in the work of both of these

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<sup>4</sup> There are several older, historical and ethnographical works on Madagascar (for example the Grandidier collection (six volumes between 1903-1920), Decary 1935, Cotte 1947, Deschamps

authors. It would be mistaken to set up a dichotomy between earlier and more recent studies of Malagasy societies, because the difference between Bloch's and Cole's work for example is mainly one of focus. While Bloch and others have concentrated on the ancestors as a source of blessing, Graeber, Astuti and Cole focus on the difficulties involved in obtaining that blessing, and on how people deal with these. These different perspectives reflect the ambiguous nature of Malagasy ancestors – they are the source of life, yet they are demanding and sometimes cruel.

What I have provided here is obviously only a sketch of the anthropology of Madagascar and I am aware that I have ignored many important contributions as well as ethnographic and theoretical subtleties. However, this thesis is not concerned with making a contribution to the understanding of the nature of Malagasy ancestors. The purpose of the above introduction to the anthropology of Madagascar is simply to illustrate “the enduring vigour of ancestors in the literature for Madagascar” (Middleton 1999a: 18) regardless of particular ethnographic and theoretical emphases.

In this light, Seventh-day Adventist non-participation in ritual practices relating to the ancestors, as I mentioned earlier, is striking indeed. And so this is perhaps a good place to say a little more about what exactly church members in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka refuse to participate in, although it will take us away from the topic of this section for a moment.

In the area of Maroantsetra, the most important ritual practices relating to the ancestors are exhumation and cattle sacrifice. Exhumation (*fañôkaraña*, *tsaboraha*, *tsaboasa*<sup>5</sup>) takes place five to seven years after a person's death<sup>6</sup> and involves the coming together of large numbers of kin and other people, the sacrifice of a cow or bull, a ritual meal and sometimes extensive festivities depending on the social status of the deceased. In the central act, the dead person's physical remains are exhumed, carefully and

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1959, 1960, Althabe 1969) and of course many works by missionaries, but Bloch's study on the Merina (1994a [1971]) initiated systematic work of a social anthropological nature.

<sup>5</sup> *Fañôkaraña* is derived from the word *akarina* which means to bring up something (the ancestral bones in this case), *tsaboraha* literally means 'to perform things', *tsaboasa* 'to perform work'.

<sup>6</sup> According to a source from 1939, the northern Betsimisaraka (a designation which includes the people of the area of Maroantsetra) used to bury their dead directly into the soil without

tenderly cleaned, wrapped in several layers of cloth, and then finally put to rest in mostly individual sarcophagi (*hazovato*)<sup>7</sup>. In most cases, a cattle sacrifice is performed for the same ancestor a couple of years later. Cattle sacrifice (*rasa hariaña*, literally: the sharing of wealth) is conceptualised as giving the ancestors their share of what their descendants have only been able to obtain thanks to their blessing (*tsodrano*), and involves the consumption of the sacrificial meat by both the community of the living and of the ancestors (also Fanony 1975: 258-268, Cole 2001: 177-191). Only when both exhumation and sacrifice have been performed for a particular ancestor is 'the work done' (*vita ny asa*) and the peril of ancestral wrath removed.

The Seventh-day Adventists do not participate in either exhumation or cattle sacrifice, even for their closest kin. They refuse to take part because, in their view, the very act of communicating with the ancestors is equivalent to collaborating with the Devil<sup>8</sup>. Why is this so? The answer is to be found in the Bible. There are several Bible passages which state that "the dead know not any thing", that they have no power over the living and that their memory ought therefore to be forgotten (e.g. Ecclesiastes 9: 5-6<sup>9</sup>). These passages are among the best-known and most often recited by the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, and many of them can pick up their Bible and find such passages with ease. "When [people] are dead, they are *dead*" (*maty dia*

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using wooden coffins as they do these days, and exhumation took place as early as one to two years after death (Decary 1939: 47).

<sup>7</sup> The majority of *hazovato* are small and contain the bones of only one or two ancestors. Some, however, are very large so that it takes some thirty men to lift their lid. In these cases, the ancestral bones of women are piled up on top of each other on one side, those of men on the other. The two piles are separated by a cement wall running the whole length through the middle. According to one source, in the 1930s, only very rich northern Betsimisaraka used to have an individual sarcophagus (Decary 1939: 48). In the 1990s, however, the opposite was the case. People aspired to have big *hazovato* which would house many ancestors, but only few could afford them.

<sup>8</sup> See Josephides 1982: 180-181 for the same point concerning Seventh-day Adventists in Papua New Guinea.

<sup>9</sup> English-speaking Seventh-day Adventists use the (New) King James Version of the Bible. The Malagasy members of the church use the standard Protestant translation in Malagasy. Ecclesiastes 9: 5-6: "For the living know that they shall die; but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun." In Malagasy: *Fa fantatry ny velona fa ho faty izy; fa ny maty kosa tsy mba mahalala na inona na inona, ary tsy manana valimpitia intsony izy; fa hadino ny fahatsiarovana azy. Na ny fitiavany, na ny fankahalany, na ny fialonany, dia samy*

*maty*), they emphasised whenever I asked them about the subject. Thus if the ancestors are just “something dead” (*raha maty?!* ), if they are “just bones” (*tôlaña fô*), how can they possibly affect the lives of the living either by blessing them or striking them with misfortune? At the same time, it is true that people do fall ill or die if they fail to do ‘the work for the ancestors’ (*ny asan-drazana*). Thus whom is one really communicating with when one thinks one is communicating with the ancestors? The answer is that it is a wolf in sheep’s clothing – it is the Devil in disguise.

This notion of Satan masquerading as one’s ancestors has made the Adventists’ non-participation in exhumation and cattle sacrifice highly significant in several respects. At the time of my fieldwork, it was one of the crucial aspects of distinguishing church members from non-Adventists, in the view of both. Moreover, non-participation in exhumation and cattle sacrifice was one of the most important criteria by which the Adventists assessed each other’s commitment to the church. A person attending every Sabbath church service, but also attending exhumations at the same time was not considered a proper Adventist. The Adventist pastor who worked in Maroantsetra at the time of my fieldwork in fact made the commitment not to participate in such practices part of the creed which church members had to vow to abide by before baptism. Reading out the Malagasy translation of the global Seventh-day Adventist creed, he always added a few words of explanation to the effect that to “renounce the sinful ways of the world” (Seventh-day Adventist vow, point three) meant not to attend any exhumation or cattle sacrifice, or even to give money or rice towards either.

Being familiar with the literature on Malagasy cultures and societies before I left for fieldwork, I was convinced that I would be studying the ways by which the Malagasy Seventh-day Adventists *combine* traditional practices relating to the ancestors and Adventist faith. I was wrong: neither do traditional and Seventh-day Adventist concepts and practices merge into a new, syncretic form, nor do they co-exist as socially related, yet incommensurable traditions of knowledge as Lambek suggests is the case with Islam, spirit possession and sorcery in Mayotte (Lambek 1993). At least from the point of view of the members of the Adventist church, one cannot work for the ancestors and be a Seventh-day Adventist at the same time.

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*efa levona ela sady tsy manana anjara intsony mandrakizay amin’ izay atao aty ambanin’ ny masoandro izy.*

To my knowledge, no other in-depth study has been undertaken as yet which discusses either the Seventh-day Adventists anywhere in Madagascar, or any other group of Malagasy people who challenge the ancestral order in such a radical way (but compare Razafindratandra et al. 1997, and Walsh 2000)<sup>10</sup>. Thus I see the principal contribution of my thesis to the anthropology of Madagascar in its focus on a possibility which one would have thought almost impossible – that of refusing *communication* with the ancestors.

The people of Maroantsetra are classified as (northern) Betsimisaraka in official statistics of Madagascar's population as well as in historical and anthropological works, and they too sometimes refer to themselves as Betsimisaraka. As has been recognised for some time, such ethnic labels are highly problematic in general. Furthermore, the label Betsimisaraka is not based on cultural unity<sup>11</sup>. However, this thesis is not about issues of ethnicity. Nor is it an area study or an ethnography of either Maroantsetra town or the village of Sahameloka. First and foremost it is an ethnography of two Seventh-day Adventist communities. Of course they do not exist in limbo but are inevitably linked to the local context in various ways, and so this relationship will be present in the background throughout the following chapters<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> In so far as Seventh-day Adventism can be seen as a millenarian movement, one could compare it to several other movements in Madagascar which were *reminiscent* of millenarianism (Ellis 1985: 132-33, 153-157) in that they aimed at bringing back an idealized past (see Raison-Jourde 1976 and 1991: 269-286 on the *Ramanenjana*, Ellis 1985 on the *Menalamba*, Tronchon 1986 on the anti-colonial rebellion of 1947). However, all of these movements aimed at *restoring*, rather than rejecting, the ancestral order, which they saw as being threatened at the time.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the term Betsimisaraka, and Betsimisaraka unity and identity, see Cole 2001: 36-40.

<sup>12</sup> Below, I list the most important ethnographic works on the Betsimisaraka.

The most recent is Jennifer Cole's ethnography of the southern Betsimisaraka, which I have already referred to (Cole 2001). The core of Cole's analysis is the relationship of her informants to their ancestors, on the one hand, and colonial rule and signs (such as tin-roofs or coffee cultivation), on the other. Both types of relationship are negotiated through cattle sacrifice and involve a process of "directed forgetting and remembering" (p. 279). However, ancestral and colonial rule are not disconnected, but interwoven in various complicated ways (see also Cole 1998, Cole and Middleton 2001). The process of remembering and forgetting is analysed in particular with regard to the events and the painful memories of the rebellion of 1947, in which the inhabitants of Cole's fieldsite were heavily involved.

## The Christian missions in Maroantsetra

### Christianity in Madagascar

Christianity has played an important role in Madagascar for almost two centuries now<sup>13</sup>. Indeed, it has been pointed out that the extent of the success of the Christian missions *prior* to colonisation is quite unparalleled in other parts of Africa (Gow [1975]). In 1993, 45% of the Malagasy population had been baptised as Christians with a slight majority of Catholics over Protestants (Hübsch 1993b: 506). However, Christianity is not equally represented in all parts of the island. Depending on the region, between 90% and 7% of the population are Christians of various denominations (also see Lupo 1985: 199). While the highlands are almost entirely Christianised, the south is almost entirely untouched by Christian influence<sup>14</sup>.

Christianity first became fully established under Merina rule in the Malagasy highlands in the 19<sup>th</sup> century largely through the work of LMS (London Missionary Society) missionaries (see Raison-Jourde 1991; for an overview see Bloch 1986, chapter 2). However, the development was not a smooth one. On the contrary, there were alternately waves of pro- and anti-Christian sentiment and action under different rulers in

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Two ethnographies of Betsimisaraka societies have been written by anthropologists of Betsimisaraka origin. Mangalaza's (1994) analysis of myths and mortuary rites focuses on their function to integrate Betsimisaraka society as one holistic whole. Fanony's much earlier study (1975) discusses local forms of authority in his village of origin (Fasina near the town of Mananara Nord to the south of Maroantsetra). Both authors stress the continued significance of ancestral traditions.

Two older ethnographies were written by missionaries (Cotte 1947, Lahady 1979) who, in their description and interpretation of practices such as mortuary rites, circumcision, spirit possession and divination, are keen to stress the similarities between Betsimisaraka and Christian concepts. Perhaps the best-known work on the people of the east coast is Althabe's study of spirit possession among the Betsimisaraka (Althabe 1969). Althabe's account is cast in terms of relations of subordination and domination, both colonial and postcolonial. The author suggests that spirit possession is an expression of rebellion against domination by colonial rulers as well as elders in some cases. But since spirit possession is always based on a master-servant relationship, it at the same time expresses an idiom of subordination which, Althabe suggests, the Malagasy have interiorised as a result of colonial rule.

The relationship between the living and the dead is of importance throughout these studies on Betsimisaraka societies. There are also several historical studies of the Betsimisaraka region, especially Esoavelomandroso 1979.

<sup>13</sup> For detailed descriptions and analyses of Christianity in Madagascar from the very first contacts (going back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century) to the present, see Hübsch 1993.

<sup>14</sup> But see Lupo 1997 for an overview of Christianity in the southwestern province of Toliara.

the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, until the Merina monarchy was abolished by French colonisation in 1896. The diverse reactions towards Christianity were due to the dilemma faced by the Merina kings and queens. On the one hand, with the missionaries came literacy and technical expertise (Ellis, W. 1838: chapter 10, Raison-Jourde 1974) both of which were crucial for the expansion of the Merina kingdom which was taking place at the time. On the other hand, the foreign missions were a potential threat to the power of the monarchy, especially as Christianity grew in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and began to escape the control of the monarchs. Different rulers embarked on different strategies. There were basically three stages. The first saw the unenthusiastic acceptance of Christianity in the 1820s (see e.g. Rasoamiamanana 1993: 219-221), the second, the expulsion of all foreign missionaries (between 1836 and 1861) and different waves of persecution of Malagasy Christians between 1837 and 1857 (Ellis, W. 1848: 483-537, Raison-Jourde 1991: chapter 3 and 4, Rasoamiamanana 1993: 229-232)<sup>15</sup>. The third stage, however, led to the baptism of the Merina queen in 1869 and the incorporation of Christianity as the Merina state religion. This was the result of the queen realizing that Christianity was too strong an enemy to further oppose and that she had more to gain than lose from siding with it (Raison-Jourde 1993: 277).

Until the end of Merina rule, Christianity – and with it schooling and literacy – remained very strongly a thing of the highlands, the centre of the Merina monarchy, and in particular its urban upper class (Lupo 1985, Raison-Jourde 1991: 668-669, Hübsch 1993b: 499). Although half a dozen missions were already present in different parts of the island from 1860 onwards (Razafiarivony 1999: 2), the vast majority of Christians were LMS Protestants in and around the capital. The impact of this in terms of schooling is still clearly noticeable to this day (Hübsch 1993b: 499). With colonisation in 1896, however, a number of different predominantly Protestant denominations gained a footing in Madagascar, each struggling for souls and territory (see Vigen & Tronchon 1993). Soon they had more or less divided the island among themselves: the highlands and the north were LMS territory, the south belonged to the Lutherans, the west to the Quakers and parts of Madagascar's east coast came under Anglican influence (Vigen & Tronchon 1993: 335-341). The Anglicans, for example, had to agree not to work in LMS territory

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<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Christianity flourished precisely during these years of persecution (Bloch 1989b: 22).

before being allowed to open their own missions in Madagascar (Razafiarivony 1999: 7). But despite this diversity of Christian denominations present all over Madagascar, the LMS remained by far the most significant.

Besides this early and strong Protestant presence in Madagascar, Catholicism struggled considerably for its own influence (Hübsch 1993a: 241-256). Roman Catholic Jesuits had tried to work in Madagascar since 1832 (Hübsch 1993a: 242), but for several decades, their efforts yielded little success (Raison-Jourde 1993: 286). Their expansion was very much restricted by the Merina monarchy who in 1869 embraced Protestantism as their state religion and expelled all French Catholic missionaries on two occasions before the end of their kingdom (1883-86, 1895-96 [Lupo 1993: 315]). With the arrival of the French in 1896, however, the Catholic missions gained support and became more and more influential (Vigen & Tronchon 1993: 341-344, Raison-Jourde 1995: 294-295). Protestantism had become the religion of the ruling class and of free people in particular in the highlands; others had been largely excluded from it. The Catholic missions therefore targeted the poorer sections of the population in these areas and in particular the ex-slaves (Rajoelison & Hübsch 1993: 275, Bloch 1994b: 134, 140, Raison-Jourde 1995: 294)<sup>16</sup>. But in other parts of Madagascar, such as the district of Maroantsetra, where the Protestant influence was not so strong or was indeed absent, the Catholic church also attracted local elites (see Raison-Jourde 1995: 294-295).

For the purpose of this thesis, the most relevant point concerning Christianity in Madagascar is the fact that the Christian missionaries concentrated all their efforts on the eradication of what they thought of as idols (*sampy*) and as such the epitome of paganism. But they failed to understand the nature of Malagasy ancestors and were thus largely unconcerned with practices relating to these (Bloch forthcoming). As a result, Christian notions and practices co-exist with those relating to the ancestors, though not always entirely unproblematically, and in many instances they merge into syncretism (Bloch 1994b, 1995b: 83, Cole 2001: 60, 127, 184, 198). The Christian God and the ancestors are often addressed jointly in the course of rituals such as cattle sacrifice in the district of Maroantsetra, as well as in Christian prayers elsewhere (Hübsch 1993b: 501) – but not in Seventh-day Adventist ones! Today, Christianity is so much an integral part of

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<sup>16</sup> For details about the Catholic mission in Madagascar, see Lupo 1974, 1985, 1990, Hübsch 1993a.



life for many people in many parts of Madagascar, that it no longer makes sense to talk of an *opposition* between Christianity and indigenous tradition. As with the situation in Oceania (Barker, J. 1990a), Christianity has become Malagasy tradition.

### **Christianity among the Betsimisaraka and in the area of Maroantsetra**

In 1818, at the very dawn of Christianity in Madagascar, the first LMS missionaries made a tentative attempt to settle in the town of Toamasina, the Betsimisaraka ‘capital’ on the island’s east coast which, coming from Mauritius, was their obvious point of entry. However, their efforts then and later on were severely hampered by the effects of “the fever” (Ellis, W. 1848: 132, 143, LMS report 1882: 91-92), which made not only European missionaries hostile to the idea of working in that area, but also Malagasy evangelists from the highlands. And so the mission in Toamasina was closed down only a year into its existence. David Jones, the only survivor, went back to Mauritius, but later settled in the Malagasy highlands where the climate was more favourable to Europeans and where he subsequently established the first missionary school (Belrose-Huygues 1993: 193-195, Ellis, W. 1848: 262-63). The LMS reports on the Betsimisaraka mission between 1876 and 1890 make clear that, even at that time, mission work had hardly begun in Toamasina, let alone in a remote place like Maroantsetra. The few LMS churches in Toamasina were almost exclusively visited by Merina traders (LMS reports of 1876 and 1882), and the local population associated Christianity with Merina rule (LMS report 1880-1990: 119). In the ‘Ten Years’ Reviews’ of 1901-1910, 1911-1920 and 1921-1930, the Toamasina (Tamatave in French) mission is only mentioned in passing. And the missionary Hardyman still speaks of the Betsimisaraka as the “forgotten children of the LMS” in 1948. Lupo (1985) paints a similar picture of the Catholic mission. He convincingly demonstrates that as with other missions in Madagascar, until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> at least, the Catholic church only had eyes for the highlands, and was completely uninterested in spreading the gospel among coastal populations such as the Betsimisaraka (Lupo 1985)<sup>17</sup>. The small number of Catholics in Toamasina were French, Creole or immigrants from highland Madagascar.

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<sup>17</sup> In contrast to the information provided by Lupo, Cole notes that there were already a hundred Betsimisaraka converts in the region of Mahanoro (where she conducted fieldwork) fifteen years *prior* to colonisation (Cole 2001: 60).

Until colonisation the impact of foreign mission was not very significant, apart from in the highlands, as noted above. After 1896, parts of eastern Madagascar came under Anglican influence<sup>18</sup>. However, the area of Maroantsetra was not part of the Anglican sphere of influence<sup>19</sup> which was concentrated further south<sup>20</sup>, and indeed, Christianisation began comparatively late in the region. Probably this was due to its relative inaccessibility coupled with its tropical disease-prone climate. The first missionaries to arrive in the town of Maroantsetra were French Jesuits.

According to a booklet available at the Catholic church in Maroantsetra<sup>21</sup>, the first French Jesuit missionary arrived in town in 1897. But he only stayed two days during which he nevertheless baptised ten children. Other French Jesuit missionaries turned up sporadically in subsequent years, each visit resulting in a few more baptisms. But it was only in 1913 that one of them actually settled in Maroantsetra town and began the task of building both a proper Catholic community and a church. The year 1915 saw the construction of the first church and the opening of a mission school. In 1934, the church was replaced by a massive construction in the middle of town which to this day is its largest building. What becomes clear from this development is that the establishment of Catholicism in Maroantsetra was a slow and lengthy process which was perhaps even more drawn out in rural areas on which, however, I have no information.

The first Protestant church was built in Maroantsetra town in 1913<sup>22</sup>. And the LMS Ten Years' Report of 1911-1920 mentions the presence of two LMS missionaries in the area of Maroantsetra. However, I lack the details concerning the impact of Protestantism in the area in the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Between the early days of Christianity in the area and the late 1950s, the Catholics gained the support of 15% of the population of the district, while only 3%

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<sup>18</sup> The Anglican denominations working in eastern Madagascar were the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) (Raison-Jourde 1993: 286). The very first Anglican SPG and CMS missionaries arrived in eastern Madagascar in 1864 (Razafiarivony 1999: 1, and personal communication).

<sup>19</sup> The first Anglican church in Maroantsetra was built in 1929. But the number of converts has always remained very small, namely 0,5-1% (Monographies de la Sous-Préfecture de Maroantsetra, 1953; unpublished statistics provided by the local Ministry of Population).

<sup>20</sup> See map in Tronchon & Vigen 1993: 336.

<sup>21</sup> *Tantara ny nidiran'ny finoana katolika teto Maroantsetra* (The history of the arrival of the Catholic faith here in Maroantsetra).

<sup>22</sup> Monografie de la Sous-Préfecture de Maroantsetra 1953.

became Protestant converts. But the Protestant church caught up with the Catholics in the course of the following decade. This may have been due to the Protestant involvement in the struggle for independence (see Rabearimanana 1993: 372-376). By the early 1970s, a decade into independence, 20% of the population of the district had been baptised as Christians: half of them as Catholics, the other half as Protestants<sup>23</sup>. At the time of my fieldwork, roughly half the population was registered as Christian with a slight majority of Catholics over Protestants (22% Protestants, 26% Catholics)<sup>24</sup>.

Besides the massive Catholic church, there are at present a large Protestant church (FJKM) in Maroantsetra town as well as houses of worship for the very few local Anglicans and Lutherans. At present, all the clerics of the different churches in Maroantsetra are Malagasy.

In terms of social stratification, in the town of Maroantsetra the Catholic church – in contrast to its history in the highlands as we have seen – seems to attract the more affluent sectors of society while poor people are more likely to be Protestants. But this is a very imprecise generalisation. It is very difficult to assess people's socio-economic position since there are no statistics available concerning land distribution, income or other sources of material wealth. But to some degree the way people dress in church and on occasions such as New Year is a fairly good indicator of economic means, since this is when they really try their hardest to dress as 'properly' and lavishly as they possibly can. Very generally speaking, the Catholic congregation seems to be heavier on gold, fashionable shoes and new clothes. A Catholic priest in Maroantsetra confirmed that there are only few very poor people among their ranks. However, to state a positive relationship between Catholicism and at least a certain degree of economic wealth in Maroantsetra town is a risky claim. Concerning the village of Sahameloka, it is simply untrue.

Both the Catholic and the Protestant churches are said by people in Sahameloka to have been there "already for a long time" (*efa ela*). I failed to investigate any further. At the time of my fieldwork, there were however clearly many more converts to Catholicism than to Protestantism. Although only few people in the village did not

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<sup>23</sup> Monographies de la Sous-Préfecture de Maroantsetra 1950,1970.

<sup>24</sup> Unpublished statistics provided by the Ministère de la Population in Maroantsetra. No statistics are available between 1970 and 1997.

belong to any Christian church at all, no more than roughly one hundred of the five hundred strong adult population attended service on an average Sunday morning. As in other small villages of the district, there was neither a Catholic priest, nor a Protestant pastor in Sahameloka, and the congregations depended on church elders to perform the necessary tasks. In the case of marriage or baptism, the priest/pastor either travelled up, or people from the village, down, the river.

If it has ever been true that Catholic villagers were more affluent than Protestant ones, this association has become completely loose and nebulous at the present time. Not only are some of the poorest people in the village Catholics, but there is no clear association of particular ancestries<sup>25</sup> with either the Catholic or the Protestant church. Moreover, many people have moved from one church to the other. Maman' i Claude (Claude's mum) of my host family in the village is a case in point. Coming from a family who attended no church at all, she had been a member of the Catholic church for several years, then joined the Protestants and 'finally' became an Adventist.

To end this section, I want to highlight two aspects concerning Christianity in Madagascar which are important to keep in mind. First, although mainstream Christianity has long played an important role in many parts of Madagascar including the region of Maroantsetra, this has not forced a choice upon people for *either* Christianity *or* their ancestors. In the area where I did fieldwork, Catholics and Protestants continue to engage in such practices as exhumation and cattle sacrifice in much the same way as people who are not affiliated with any church. Second, Christianity (Protestantism) entered Madagascar by way of literacy and schooling. I will come back to this point in chapter 11.

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<sup>25</sup> Because of the flexibility of patrilineal rules (also see Fanony 1975: 162 regarding Mananara to the south of Maroantsetra), I use, following Cole (2001: 69, 71), the term ancestry to refer to exogamous, named descent groups.

## Introduction to Seventh-day Adventism

A great number of Christian sects (in the sense that they deviate from the mainstream churches) have made their appearance in Madagascar in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Aubert 1997<sup>26</sup>). Some have remained of little impact; others have gained tens of thousands of followers.

The groups I am concerned with here are what I will call New Christian Groups in Madagascar. By New Christian Groups I mean contemporary Christian groups or movements, other than the long-established Catholic and Protestant denominations, which although they may have been present in Madagascar for a long time (as indeed is the case with the Seventh-day Adventist church, see below) are presently attracting a particularly large number of people. Most of these groups, such as the Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses, are part of international churches.

Many – from ordinary people, to pastors and priests, to radio presenters as well as academics and theologians – have commented on the recent growth of such New Christian Groups in Madagascar. A particularly large number of these groups work in the island's major towns (Aubert 1997). Yet my research shows that New Christian Groups are not only an urban phenomenon, because the vast majority of Seventh-day Adventists in the district of Maroantsetra are in fact people in the countryside. To the best of my knowledge, no in-depth study of any such group in Madagascar has yet been undertaken<sup>27</sup>, but their contemporary significance and influence in many parts of the

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<sup>26</sup> Aubert (1997: 21-22) distinguishes between *Églises historiques* (Protestants, Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans), *Fifohazana* (Malagasy Revival Movement from 1894 onwards), *Églises indépendantes* (Independent churches which have separated from an *Église historique*), other *groupements chrétiens* (Seventh-day Adventists, Baptistes Mormons and others), *groupes évangéliques ou fondamentalistes* who have arrived in Madagascar in the course of the past 30 years (Jesosy Mamonjy since 1963, Pentecostalistes since 1970 and others), and finally groups at the margin of Christianity such as Jehovah's Witnesses (the reason why he classifies them as "en marge ou en dehors" is that they do not accept the Holy Trinity). A somewhat different categorisation of Christian churches is offered by Ramino 1993: 420-422.

<sup>27</sup> This was confirmed by Fulgence Fanony, professor at the University of Toamasina, as well as Michel Razafiarivony, lecturer at the University of Antananarivo (personal communication). There are, however, three very short discussions on the issue of sects published by the FJKM (Protestant umbrella organisation), all in Malagasy ('Le Chiffre 666' by Pasteur Rakotoarimanana; 'SOS sekta' by Pasteur Rabehatonina; 'Ny sekta' by Takidy, Emile). The General Secretary of the centre of the Seventh-day Adventist Indian Ocean Union Mission in Antananarivo also confirmed that there is no study of Seventh-day Adventism in Madagascar (personal communication).

country is certainly recognised. Indeed, the mainstream churches are getting increasingly worried about losing members to such New Christian Groups. In 1997, the Catholic church organised a week-long conference in Antananarivo, Madagascar's capital, on the relationship between the institutionalised churches and "Nouveaux Groupements Religieux". The publication to which the conference led<sup>28</sup> unfortunately does not contain all that much information on these groups. But the very fact that there was such a conference, and that one of the key questions discussed was whether or not these "Nouveaux Groupements Religieux" pose a threat to the traditional churches, testifies to their significance in contemporary Madagascar despite the comparatively small numbers of converts<sup>29</sup>. Indeed such New Christian Groups seem to mushroom all over the Third World, in particular in Africa (Gifford 1994) and Latin America (Martin 1990, Lehmann 1996).

However, I want immediately to add a note of caution here. Whilst it does indeed seem to be the case that churches such as the Seventh-day Adventist or various groups in the Pentecostalist tradition are presently experiencing extraordinary growth in Madagascar, it does not follow from that that the contemporary success of such movements is unparalleled in the history of the island, or elsewhere for that matter. On 14<sup>th</sup> June 1930, for example, the colonial administrator of Majunga (a town on the west coast of Madagascar) wrote a letter to the Gouverneur Général in which he informed the governor of the presence of Seventh-day Adventists in Majunga and expressed his concern that the "culte" was potentially politically subversive<sup>30</sup>. This suggests that Seventh-day Adventist influence in the 1930s was at least strong enough to worry the colonial administration. I will later provide more detailed statistics on the growth of the church in Madagascar since its arrival. Here I simply want to point out that although New Christian Groups in Madagascar may be particularly successful at present, we

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<sup>28</sup> Madagascar, Églises instituées et Nouveaux Groupements Religieux. Antananarivo: Institut Catholique de Madagascar. Collection ISTA, no 7.

<sup>29</sup> I have been unable to find any overall statistics on New Christian Groups in Madagascar. On the basis of statistics on the Seventh-day Adventist church and the church of Jehovah's Witnesses which I obtained from their headquarters in Antananarivo (see below), my estimate is that the members of all of these groups do not make up more than a few percent of the total population. According to Roubaud (1998), such groups only make up 2% of the population of the capital.

<sup>30</sup> I wish to thank Francoise Raison-Jourde for providing me with this information (source: AOM, Aix en Provence, Série Affaires Politiques, MAD ggm 6(4) D51).

cannot assume that this is the first wave of their success. Perhaps it is, perhaps it is not. The only way to know would be to do the necessary archival research which, however, is beyond the scope of my research.

For the purpose of the present thesis it is particularly relevant to note that many New Christian Groups in Madagascar, but by no means all, have a fundamentally critical attitude towards practices which involve the communication between the living and the dead. This is true for all New Christian Groups at present in the district of Maroantsetra; I will introduce them below. However, my thesis is not about all of them, but only about the Seventh-day Adventist church, whose history and contemporary significance world-wide, in Madagascar, as well as in Maroantsetra town and the village of Sahameloka, I now turn to.

### **Seventh-day Adventism – a global movement**

The Seventh-day Adventist church grew out of an apocalyptic-millenarian movement around William Miller<sup>31</sup> in the 1840s in the United States, one of many movements of religious revival at the time (Vance 1999: 1, 13). The core of Miller's prophecies – which were based on years of intense Bible study (Hoekema 1963: 89-90, Knight 1993: 35-41) – was the expected Second Coming of Christ in 1844<sup>32</sup>. As the date passed uneventfully, resulting in what has become known as 'The Great Disappointment', many of Miller's followers lost hope and the movement split into numerous directions and factions<sup>33</sup>. One of these, however, resurrected around a young woman, the seventeen-year old Ellen G. White (1827-1915) who, as a result of an accident at the age of nine, had become a partial invalid. Ellen White's spiritual leadership of what later became the Seventh-day Adventist church was based on dramatic visions she had been experiencing since the Great Disappointment. She became recognised as the contemporary medium of the Holy Spirit and thus as a true prophetess<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> For details on his life and prophecies, see Knight 1993 (in particular chapters 2 and 3), Vance 1999: 14-22.

<sup>32</sup> This date was the result of complicated calculations based on the Book of Daniel and the Revelation (for details see Hoekema 1963: 90-94, Nyaundi 1997: 15-19, Vance 1999: 18-27).

<sup>33</sup> See Knight 1993 for a detailed analysis.

<sup>34</sup> On Ellen G. White see Hoekema 1963: 96-98, Knight 1993: 300-303, Vance 1999: 22-25, 42-44. Several publications have been devoted to her life and work. Among them Numbers 1976 on

In parantheses: because little Ellen could not further attend school after her accident, many of the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka understand that she was practically illiterate – which however is not entirely accurate – and therefore see in the many books she wrote proof of the Holy Spirit speaking, or writing rather, through her. Her books are regularly read in church, in particular in Maroantsetra and to a lesser extent in Sahameloka, and some of the more literate members have one or several of them at home.

In 1860, the Seventh-day Adventist church established a legal organisation and adopted its name. ‘Seventh-day Adventist’ refers on the one hand to the church’s stress on the importance of keeping the Holy Sabbath on the *seventh* day of Creation considered to be Saturday<sup>35</sup>, and on the other, to the certainty of Christ’s second *advent*. The General Conference of Adventists was founded in 1863 in Michigan (Vance 1999: 32).

Seventh-day Adventism grew “from the ashes of the Great Disappointment” (Vance 1999: 25) and soon spread – its missionary program focussing on education and health – all over the globe. The tremendous expansion was well under way by 1903, when Seventh-day Adventist missionaries had arrived in every continent and world membership already amounted to almost 80,000 (Pfeiffer 1985: 18).

By 1961, 195 of the 220 recognised countries in the world had been reached by the Seventh-day Adventist church and its publications appeared in over 200 languages. World membership had crossed the one million mark, and already then, three quarters of all Seventh-day Adventists lived outside the United States (Hoekema 1963: 99-100). World membership in the 1980s amounted to over 5 million people, the vast majority of these in countries of the Third World (Bruinsma [1988]: 18<sup>36</sup>). The ten million mark was reached in 1998 and at present some 11,5 million people world-wide are baptised members of the Seventh-day Adventist church. According to the statistics provided on the church’s website<sup>37</sup>, almost 3000 new members join every day. The Adventist church

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her work as a health reformer. For a bibliography of her voluminous writings, see Hoekema 1963: 424-25.

<sup>35</sup> For the development of this doctrine see Hoekema 1963: 95-96.

<sup>36</sup> According to information provided by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in the Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook 2001 (available online at ‘<http://www.adventist.org>’), nine out of ten church members now live outside the USA (Yearbook 2001: Facts and figures).

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.adventist.org/worldchurch/factsandfigures.html>



also runs an immense system of schools, institutions, colleges, universities and hospitals (Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook 2001: General Conference). However, one also needs to recognise that the success of the church is distributed across the globe extremely unevenly. While church members in the Pacific Islands are especially numerous, there are practically none in some strongly Islamic countries<sup>38</sup>. In other words, although the church is present in the vast majority of the countries of the world, it is so to very different degrees of influence.

The Seventh-day Adventist mission entered Africa<sup>39</sup> in the 1880s from the northern and southern extreme of the continent, namely Egypt and South Africa. The first converts were found among the European settlers of these colonies. The first mission station among the indigenous population was opened in 1894 in what is now Zimbabwe (Pfeiffer 1985: 14). A great number of African countries soon followed. The first Adventist mission in East Africa was opened in Tanzania in 1903 (Pfeiffer 1985: 9). While in 1987 more than a quarter of world-wide members of the Seventh-day Adventist church lived in Africa (Bruinsma [1988]: 79), African members now make up a third of the global community of Seventh-day Adventists<sup>40</sup>.

But again we need to recognise the immense differences across regions and countries. While in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia together, there are a mere 46 Seventh-day Adventists, and in Burkina Faso only 1361 (total population: 12m), the Seventh-day Adventists in Zimbabwe make up 2,8% of the total population (322,592 of 11,3 m), in Zambia 3,5% (341,583 of 9,5 m), and among the small Rwandian population of 7,2 million, as many as 340,000 have been baptised as Seventh-day Adventists, that is 4,7%. Nowhere else in Africa are there as many Seventh-day Adventists as in Rwanda. The

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<sup>38</sup> The statistics of the Seventh-day Adventist church are divided into 12 "world divisions" which are basically organised along language lines (thus Madagascar is in the same division as francophone West Africa) and which are further subdivided into "unions" (which also are further subdivided). The Central Pacific Union Mission (including for instance Fiji, Cook Island, French Polynesia, Samoa) counts 32,721 members, that is roughly 2% from a population of 1,6 million. The Western Pacific Union Mission (including for example Solomon Islands) has over 45,000 Seventh-day Adventists from a population of just 733,000, that is over 6%. Papua New Guinea has a membership of over 200,000 from a total population of 4,8 million (i.e. 4%). In contrast, there are only 122 members in the Euro-Africa Division which includes Afghanistan, Algeria, Iran, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey and Western Sahara (Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook 2001).

<sup>39</sup> For details on the mission in Africa see Pfeiffer 1985, Owusa-Mensa 1993, Nyaundi 1997.

majority of African countries (except for northern Africa) have a number of Adventists between 0,5 – 1%. The most marked concentration of Adventists is found in some areas of eastern Africa<sup>41</sup>. In west Africa, only Ghana has a membership of over 1% (for statistics on Madagascar see below).

Before I go on to discuss the history of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Madagascar, let me briefly explain some important parts of the doctrine Seventh-day Adventists adhere to. The Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual and other publications list 27 “fundamental Biblical truths”<sup>42</sup> which church members must accept. Here I will present only a few of these, which I understand to be the most significant doctrinal aspects for church members in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka.

Firstly, the basis of Seventh-day Adventist doctrine is what Ellen White coined The Great Controversy in a book of that title, that is the fight between the forces of Good and Evil ever since Lucifer’s fall. World history, from its very beginning to its very end, is understood with reference to this ongoing battle between God and Satan. As I will discuss in more detail in chapter 7, everything that happens under the sun and beyond is interpreted as a manifestation of the fight between the Devil and God.

Secondly, Christ’s return to earth – visible for all – is not a hope, but a *certainty* in the eyes of Seventh-day Adventists. He will return and take all righteous people with Him to Heaven. There they will remain for a thousand years, the point of the millennium being to eradicate all possible doubt as to the justice of God’s judgement. At the end of the millennium Evil will be annihilated and Paradise on earth (alternatively called New Jerusalem, a term perfectly familiar to Malagasy Adventists [*Jerosalema Vaovao*]) will be reestablished and the just will live there forever together with God Himself. The beginning of this sequence of events is thought to lie in the near future. Many of my Malagasy Seventh-day Adventist friends are unclear about the exact course of events

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<sup>40</sup> On the basis of the statistics available in the Yearbook 2001, I calculated 3,8 million African members of the church from a global membership of 11,5 million people.

<sup>41</sup> In numerically descending order: Rwanda: 4,7%, Zambia: 3,5%, Zimbabwe: 2,8%, Malawi: 1,8%, Kenya: 1,7%, Angola: 1,6%, Botswana: 1,4%, Burundi: 1% (percentages calculated on the basis of statistics provided in the Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook 2001).

<sup>42</sup> For details see for example *Ce que croient les adventistes. 27 vérité bibliques fondamentales*. Dammarie-Les-Lys: Editions Vie et Santé. English speakers may refer to the website of the

after Christ's return to earth. But they all know that, eventually, they will – hopefully – arrive in Paradise and live there forever. And they also know that Christ's return will be necessarily foreshadowed by the physical persecution of all people, such as themselves, who worship God on the Sabbath rather than on Sunday. I will come back to all of these points in due course and discuss them in more depth.

Seventh-day Adventist doctrine not only contains eschatology, but also instructions as to what one must, and must not, do. First and foremost, one must keep the Sabbath and neither do any work nor handle money except when necessary in order to help another human being<sup>43</sup>. Second, one must study the Bible in order to understand God's wisdom. Third, one must adhere to the food instructions as given in the Biblical chapter of Leviticus. And fourth, one must get baptised by full immersion into water. Seventh-day Adventist doctrine, much of it specified in the writings of Ellen White, gives detailed instructions on a great number of issues. But the aspects I just mentioned were the most prominent among church members in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka when I lived with them. On top of these not specifically Malagasy instructions came, as I already explained, the requirement not to communicate with the dead.

### **The Seventh-day Adventist church in Madagascar**

The Seventh-day Adventist church is by no means the only New Christian Group in Madagascar. Yet it is a particularly successful one. In fact, it was the first Protestant sect (in the sense defined at the beginning of this section) to set foot in Madagascar in 1926, shortly before the Baptists (in 1932; Rabearimanana 1993: 389). The first missionary couple<sup>44</sup> arrived in the capital Antananarivo, and immediately set up a press and started publishing<sup>45</sup>. One year later, the first reunion of all new members was organised and the first Seventh-day Adventist church on Malagasy soil was inaugurated. Other missionaries from Europe and the United States soon followed now working together

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General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (<http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/index.html>). For a summary of Adventist beliefs see Vance 1999: 40-57.

<sup>43</sup> According to my informants, one is allowed, for example, to wash a sick person's sheets if necessary, to buy medicine and to even miss a Sabbath service in order to visit a friend in hospital.

<sup>44</sup> According to Rabearimanana (1993: 389), the first Seventh-day Adventist missionaries to Madagascar were American. Their names (Marius Raspal and his wife, Gerber 1950: 182) suggest they were of French origin.

with Malagasy assistants. By the end of 1929, they had baptised a hundred Malagasy people. The first Adventist mission school was opened in the capital in 1934. Within a year, a hundred pupils were taught there<sup>45</sup>. By 1947 the Seventh-day Adventist mission in Madagascar had spread to many parts of the island, built 25 churches and the number of members had reached almost six hundred. However, it was particularly in the aftermath of the Second World War that not only the Seventh-day Adventist church and other similar movements experienced a sudden growth, but Christianity in general. It has been suggested that this was due to the increasing *malgachisation* of many Protestant churches in Madagascar which in turn was a manifestation of the independence movement (Rabearimanana 1993: 385-390).

In 1964, the Seventh-day Adventist church in Madagascar had almost four thousand baptised members. By 1987 membership had grown to 25,000 (Rabearimanana 1993: 389). By the end of 1998, 54,000 had converted to Seventh-day Adventism, four thousand in the course of the past year only<sup>47</sup>. And the Yearbook 2001 gives a total number of 66,000 Malagasy Adventists, that is almost 0,5% of the overall population of Madagascar. This number is similar to that of Seventh-day Adventists in most African countries. Reflecting Christianisation in Madagascar in general, only few Seventh-day Adventists live in the southern parts of Madagascar<sup>48</sup>. An Adventist radio station has been broadcasting across the island since 1989.

### **The Seventh-day Adventist church in Maroantsetra**

There are five different New Christian Groups in the district of Maroantsetra: Jehovah's Witnesses (Vavolombelon' i Jehovah), Pentecostalists (Fiangonana Pantekotista), Jesus

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<sup>45</sup> For the early history of Seventh-day Adventism in Madagascar, see Gerber 1950: 182-184.

<sup>46</sup> Seventh-day Adventist schools in fact enjoy a very good reputation not only among Adventists themselves. In Maroantsetra there was a Muslim family who sent their children to the Adventist school in Antananarivo, because of its good scholarly as well as moral reputation.

<sup>47</sup> Statistics provided by the Seventh-day Adventist centre in Antananarivo. Ramino (1993) claims 65,000 adherents to Adventism, but his figure probably includes people not yet baptised. 54,000 are less than 0,5% of the entire population of Madagascar, but a larger percentage of the Christianised areas. Most of the larger other New Christian Groups have a membership between 10,000 and 15,000 (see Ramino 1993: 421-422). Jehovah's Witnesses, for example have 10,000 converts nationwide (information by their Malagasy headquarters).

<sup>48</sup> 25,000 live in the provinces of Antananarivo and Toamasina, 20,000 belong to the North Malagasy Mission while only 8800 live in the provinces of Toliara and Fort-Dauphin in the south (statistics of 1998).

Saves Christians (Jesosy Mamonjy, founded in the 1960s by an African-American) and Ara-Pilazantsara (this is a branch of the Canadian Lutheran church called Du Sauveur Vivant). And finally there are the Seventh-day Adventists who are by far the largest of these New Christian Groups. While the Adventist church in town is a solid structure not much smaller than the Protestant one, the churches of the other groups are constructed in typical local fashion out of more perishable material. Not only is the Seventh-day Adventist church the most influential one, but it started to evangelise in the district of Maroantsetra some twenty years earlier than the other New Christian Groups, namely in 1966<sup>49</sup>. By the end of 1999, 1250 people had been baptised as Seventh-day Adventists in the district – that is slightly less than 1% of the entire population – while the numbers of members of the other New Christian Groups were significantly lower<sup>50</sup>.

There are certain important similarities between these groups, such as their attitude towards exhumation and other ritual practices, as well as their expectation of Christ's return. However, there are also significant differences in terms of practice as well as doctrine. The style of service among the Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses for example differs remarkably from that of the Pentecostals and Ara-Pilazantsara who seem to induce trance-like states in some of their members during church services (I attended services of both these groups a couple of times during fieldwork). The Seventh-day Adventists talk with a degree of disgust about this 'loud' behaviour (*mitabataba loatra zare!*).

The first Adventist evangelist, whom the oldest members of the church remember as Pastera (pastor) Charles, arrived in Maroantsetra in 1966<sup>51</sup>. After a *conférence* in the town's Community Hall (*tranom-pokonolona*) which lasted for two weeks, some twenty people converted and helped build the first Adventist church. The

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<sup>49</sup> The Ara-Pilazantsara started to work in Maroantsetra in 1983, Jehovah's Witnesses in 1988 (personal communication with the pastor of Ara-Pilazantsara and the elder of Jehovah's Witnesses in Maroantsetra town). I am not certain of the exact date of arrival of the two other churches, but I assume it to be in the 1980s as well.

<sup>50</sup> At the time of my fieldwork, the Ara-Pilazantsara had 13 churches and a total of 700 members in the district (of whom 250 in town), while Jehovah's Witnesses counted but 60 members (personal communication). The figures for the Pentecostal church and of Jesus Saves probably lie somewhere in between. The Seventh-day Adventist church is the only of these five New Christian Groups which was recorded in the 1998 statistics of the local Ministry of Population.

first actual baptisms followed in 1968. Two years later, when the Seventh-day Adventist mission was first mentioned in the *Monografie de la Sous-Préfecture de Maroantsetra*, it had 146 baptised adult converts<sup>52</sup>. In that year, the Adventist church was running an elementary school in Maroantsetra town teaching 120 boys and girls<sup>53</sup>. In the same year, the Catholic and the Protestant missions which had been running their own schools since the beginning of their missionary work in the area decades ago, had thousands of converts<sup>54</sup>, yet only 450 pupils attended the Catholic mission school, and 240 the Protestant (*Monografie de la Sous-Préfecture de Maroantsetra* of 1970). The number of children taught at the Adventist school is astonishingly high and testifies to the church's emphasis on education.

However, the Seventh-day Adventist school was closed in 1978, only eight years after it had opened, for reasons I do not know. At the time of my fieldwork twenty years on, the wife of the pastor of the district reopened a Seventh-day Adventist school teaching two elementary classes in the same old building. Unfortunately, the school was destroyed by a cyclone a few months later and as far as I know has not yet been rebuilt.

The Adventist community in the district of Maroantsetra consists of many small communities. This is reflected in the fact that despite their comparatively small numbers, the Seventh-day Adventists run 47 local churches scattered all over the district, that is almost as many as the Protestants (who run 66) and half as many as the Catholics (who run 102). While about 300 people are annually baptised as Catholics<sup>55</sup> (and that includes children), the number of converts to the Seventh-day Adventist church has, in recent years, been remarkably close to this<sup>56</sup>. 200 people were baptised in a mass ceremony in May 1999 alone. In recognition of the unusual recent spread of Adventism in the region, Maroantsetra was named 'district of the year 1999' by the central Adventist administration in Madagascar's capital<sup>57</sup>. However, not all of these newly baptised

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<sup>51</sup> Since the beginning of the church's activities in the district of Maroantsetra in 1966, nine different pastors have worked in the area, most of them originating from the Malagasy highlands; none of them was of local origin.

<sup>52</sup> The Seventh-day Adventists only practise adult baptism (in Madagascar after the age of about 14).

<sup>53</sup> 72 boys and 47 girls.

<sup>54</sup> In 1970, there were 8200 Catholics and 7500 Protestants in the district.

<sup>55</sup> Personal communication with a Catholic priest in Maroantsetra.

<sup>56</sup> In 1998, 107 people were baptised as Seventh-day Adventists, and at least 250 in 1999.

<sup>57</sup> Faneva Advantista 1999:17-18, and personal communication with the pastor in Maroantsetra.

people – many of whom joined the church only a few weeks after their first contact with Adventism – have remained or are likely to remain active members of the church. A few of those baptised in May 1999 had already ‘gone cold’ (*lasa mangatsiaka*), as the process of apostasy is described, when I left Maroantsetra a year later, and some even earlier<sup>58</sup>.

In the district of Maroantsetra, Seventh-day Adventism is predominantly a rural phenomenon. Out of the 1250 baptised church members by the end of 1999, only 104 were residents of Maroantsetra town. The rest were people in the countryside. The almost fifty villages where there are Adventists are to be found in all areas of the district. But in some, there is a particularly high concentration of Seventh-day Adventist congregations. Sahameloka is located in one such area.

### **The Seventh-day Adventist church in Sahameloka**

The Adventist history of the village of Sahameloka is much more recent than that of Maroantsetra town. My host family in Sahameloka were the very first converts to Seventh-day Adventism in the village. I will come back to their conversion story in chapter 3. During the first six months after they had become interested in Adventism, they regularly went to another village an hour’s walk away where there was already an Adventist congregation, in order to attend the Sabbath service. In the course of the same year, 1993, several other people from Sahameloka joined them and soon they decided to build their own church in Sahameloka. In 1994, the first two people got baptised, followed by another two in the same year. But it was in 1995 that the Adventist religion really started to take off in the village. That year, as many as twelve people got baptised in one day down by the river which gives the village its name. The peak of conversion to Seventh-day Adventism in Sahameloka was, so people confirmed to me, between 1995 and 1997. Since then, the church’s sudden, impressive growth has subsided somewhat and the numbers have remained more or less steady. Although the great majority of those who became baptised members have remained actively engaged in church affairs<sup>59</sup>, what

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<sup>58</sup> The drop-out rate is extremely difficult to estimate since the boundaries between people with varying degrees of commitment are fluid. Only very few of those who ‘have gone cold’ retreat officially, and indeed they may come back to the church at any time.

<sup>59</sup> Only four baptised members have so far retreated from the church, two officially so, the other two for all intents and purposes (they have ‘gone cold’).

I am documenting is at least with respect to Sahameloka clearly the *beginning* of a movement and it remains to be seen how Adventism develops in the course of the years and possibly decades to come.

Sahameloka is at present one of the villages in the district with a disproportionately high number of members of the Seventh-day Adventist church. At the time of my fieldwork, almost ten percent of the village population over the age of 14 (the minimum age for baptism) had been baptised as Seventh-day Adventists (47 out of 565<sup>60</sup>) as opposed to roughly one percent in the entire district.

## **A brief review of the literature on Seventh-day Adventism and 'religious fundamentalism'**

### **Seventh-day Adventism**

Seventh-day Adventism has been subsumed under many different labels such as fundamentalism, evangelical or conservative Protestantism and millenarianism. Some have called the movement a (free) church, others a sect or a cult. As far as I am aware, there are only very few studies in the social sciences which take Seventh-day Adventist congregations or communities as their main focus of interest, rather than only mentioning them in passing.

Despite its success in many African countries, there is, to the best of my knowledge, no literature on Seventh-day Adventism in any African context<sup>61</sup>. Reflecting

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<sup>60</sup> This figure I obtained from the Ministère de la Population in Maroantsetra town whose employees were always extremely helpful. However, it is inevitably an estimate to some degree, since many, if not most, people in Sahameloka only have a rough idea of their own age.

<sup>61</sup> The only exception I am aware of is an article by Poewe (1978). But Poewe's comparison between post-conversion changes of behaviour among Zambian Seventh-day Adventists, on the one hand, and Jehovah's Witnesses, on the other, is based on a misunderstanding of Seventh-day Adventist doctrine. Her argument is based on the misconceived claim that salvation for Seventh-day Adventists does not depend on *individual* behaviour while it does for Jehovah's Witnesses (I would be very surprised if this was actually an ethnographic difference to the context I study). The article is unconvincing also because many concepts are employed uncritically. It is particularly surprising that there are no studies of Seventh-day Adventism in Rwanda given the church's enormous success in that country. There are, however, a number of publications by members of the Seventh-day Adventist church documenting Adventist history in particular African countries which provide much useful information (see Pfeiffer 1985 on the



the church's particular success in the Pacific region, most available studies on Seventh-day Adventism in the Third World concern societies in either Papua New Guinea (Josephides 1982, Chowning 1990, Westermarck 1998), one of the Pacific islands (Ross 1978 on Malaita, Miyazaki 2000 on Fiji) or the whole Pacific region (Steley 1990). Two pieces of work on the church in Papua New Guinea stress the similarities between Adventism and local cargo cults. According to Chowning's analysis (1990), Seventh-day Adventism in Papua New Guinea is all about material benefits, real and imagined. In its instrumentalist approach to conversion, Chowning's argument seems to me to be rather less subtle than earlier studies of cargo cults (e.g. Worsley 1970 [1957]). Josephides (1982) focuses on the relationship between the Boroi's conversion to Seventh-day Adventism in the 1950s and their subsequent embrace of 'business' (*bisnis*). She argues that both Adventism and *bisnis* are seen as roads towards modernity and wealth, and that, for the Boroi, Seventh-day Adventism has become a stepping-stone towards a prosperous future based on *bisnis*. As part of her overall argument, Josephides also discusses various similarities between local cargo cults, on the one hand, and Adventism and *bisnis*, on the other. Westermarck's work (1998) suggests that by providing a historical framework for interpreting the past, the present and the future (the entire human history is explained by reference to the Great Controversy between God and Satan), Adventism becomes an anchor of identity allowing Papua New Guineans to relocate themselves at a time of rapid social change. In an earlier study (1987), Westermarck analyses how Seventh-day Adventists in Papua New Guinea relate both to the village legal council and to Adventist institutions in order to settle disputes. Ross (1978) provides an overview of different missions on Malaita (Solomon Islands). His description of the Seventh-day Adventist mission stresses the importing of Western Christian models and values at the expense of indigenous tradition. His explanation of the success of the Seventh-day Adventist mission emphasises material benefits provided by Seventh-day Adventist hospitals, schools, enterprises as well as the rejection of costly customs. Ross interprets Seventh-day Adventism as "a European-sponsored cargo cult" (Ross 1978: 196). Based on fieldwork in Fiji, Miyazaki's article discusses the

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contributions of the Seventh-day Adventist church to the development of several east African countries, Owusa-Mensa 1993 on the history of Seventh-day Adventism among the Akan people of Ghana, and Nyaundi 1997 for a strikingly sociological analysis of Kenyan Adventism).

similarities between traditional notions of exchange, on the one hand, and Methodist and Seventh-day Adventist church services, on the other (2000). Steley's unpublished thesis (1990) is a historical study of the arrival and the development of the Seventh-day Adventist church in the Pacific region over a hundred years (1886-1986).

A particularly detailed study of Seventh-day Adventism in a Latin American context is offered by Lewellen (1978, 1979). Although there are certain problems with his argument, his analysis of the relationship between economic changes and the emergence of a Seventh-day Adventist elite among the Aymara Indians of Peru (1978: 109-140, 1979) is, in my view, outstanding in at least one respect. Despite the fact that at the time of his fieldwork in the 1970s the Seventh-day Adventists in the villages he studied were clearly an economic and political elite, Lewellen does not jump to an instrumentalist kind of explanation ('they joined so as to become the elite they are'). Instead he looks at the well documented history of Adventism in the Lake Titicaca area where the Seventh-day Adventist mission has been extraordinarily successful<sup>62</sup>. What he finds is that a handful of American-Indian *campesinos* turned to the Seventh-day Adventist church at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for support in their desire for education which they had come to recognise as "a key to solve many of [their] people's problems" (Kessler 1967: 228). Since education of the Indians posed a threat to the big landowners and the Catholic church who had a vested interest in the conservation of existing power structures, the converts to Seventh-day Adventism had to endure severe harassment, imprisonment and physical assault over long periods of time; many of them were even killed. Not only was there no economic or any other kind of *benefit* for church members over these years, but they often manoeuvred themselves into social marginality and physical danger. Nevertheless, they continued their efforts and schooling program over decades despite the fact that education was of "little practical value" (Lewellen 1979: 248). However, the situation changed completely to their advantage when, in the 1950s, the Aymara Indians of Peru found themselves in a period of rapid economic change which necessitated literacy, command of Spanish and familiarity with the outside world. With regard to these requirements, the Adventists were generations ahead of

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<sup>62</sup> Lewellen's argument is based on the history of the development of the Seventh-day Adventist mission in Chile and Peru, and in particular in the Lake Titicaca region, provided by Kessler

everyone else around. And that is how they became the economic and political elite they were when Lewellen conducted his fieldwork. Although Seventh-day Adventism in the Lake Titicaca region is historically closely linked to American-Indian resistance against exploitation and discrimination, Lewellen emphasises “the tremendous power of an *idea* – of education” (Lewellen 1979: 251, italics in original) as a motive for conversion that one needs to take seriously. This interpretation is particularly powerful with regard to the Peruvian context of political persecution of Adventists over long periods of time.

### Religious ‘fundamentalism’

Besides this small number of studies in the social sciences relating specifically to Seventh-day Adventism in different parts of the Third World, there is a vast body of literature discussing what is usually referred to as religious ‘fundamentalism’. Seventh-day Adventism is clearly the kind of movement which has been referred to and discussed in that literature which I will, therefore, look at in some detail<sup>63</sup>. The purpose of this section is to highlight those aspects which are significant in view of the issues discussed in this thesis. Once the ethnography has been presented, we will be able to assess and evaluate whether and in how far available analyses help us understand the phenomenon of Seventh-day Adventism in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka.

There has of course been a vast amount of by now classical work on Christianity in Africa (such as Sundkler 1961, 1976) and elsewhere, as well as recent studies which attempt to reconceptualise Christianity in various settings. The focus with regard to

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(1967: 222-242) and the writings of Stahl, the first Seventh-day Adventist missionary to the region he studies.

<sup>63</sup> In recent years, and in particular in response to outbreaks of violence, numerous studies of what has been coined New Religious Movements in Western contexts – typical examples are the Moonies, Scientology, Hare Krishna – have emerged (see Robbins and Anthony 1979, Barker, E. 1984, 1987, 1989 [with an excellent annotated bibliography on New Religious Movements], 1998, Dawson 1998a, 1998b [for a good overview], and in response to violent events [WACO, Solar Temple, Heaven’s Gate, Jonestown Guyana] Barker, E. 1986, Lewis, J.R. 1994, Hall 2000). One of the main characteristics of such movements is the combination of elements of many different religious and other traditions from around the world (Barker, E. 1989: 145). This, and a number of other factors, have convinced me that New Religious Movements in the USA, Europe, Japan and elsewhere are of an essentially different nature than Seventh-day Adventism and related phenomena. I have thus neglected the literature on such movements. The boundaries are, however, not entirely clear. The Branch Davidians involved in the infamous WACO events of 1993, for example, were a splinter group of the Seventh-day Adventist church (see Lawson 1995).

African Christianities has, at least until recently, been on Independent African Churches (Peel 2000: 3, 255), on the one hand, and syncretic forms of religiosity which merge Christian concepts and practices with indigenous ones (e.g. Fernandez 1982), on the other. However, Seventh-day Adventism in my fieldsites does not correspond to either of these forms of Christianity<sup>64</sup>.

Although the *theoretical* approaches to ‘fundamentalism’ I will consider here are mostly based on a comparison between Christian, Islamic, Jewish and ‘fundamentalist’ movements of other religious traditions (see the five volumes of the Fundamentalism Project edited by Marty and Appleby 1991-1995), I will ignore the *specific data* relating to other than Christian ‘fundamentalist’ groups for the simple fact that the amount of literature, in particular on Islamic movements, has become so vast that it is difficult, for a non-specialist, not to lose track.

The term ‘fundamentalist’ originated in the 1920s in the USA and was closely linked to the creationism versus evolutionism debate which culminated in the famous Scopes Trial (because of the connection to evolutionism, also called Monkey Trial)<sup>65</sup>. The at the time still young Seventh-day Adventist church was closely involved on the side of the creationists (Spuhler 1985: 108) who set out to defend, in “a series of pamphlets called ‘The Fundamentals of the Faith’ “(Bruce 2000: 10), their belief in the literal truth of the Bible against evolutionism and other modernist tendencies. And they wore the label ‘fundamentalist’ with pride (Caplan 1987a: 3, Marty 1992: 16).

Having originated in a historically specific context, the term ‘fundamentalist’ is now used to refer to a great variety of theologically conservative religious movements in the Christian, Jewish, Islamic and other traditions<sup>66</sup>. Many scholars have discussed and questioned the usefulness of the term (Caplan 1987a: 4-5, Marty 1992: 5, Marty and

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<sup>64</sup> Gifford has pointed to various differences between African Independent Churches and new churches in Africa (1998: 334).

<sup>65</sup> For details see Larson 1997, also Spuhler 1985: 108, 118-120, Harding 1991, Bruce 2000: 69. For an overview of creationist history and theory see Numbers 1992 (Numbers grew up in an Seventh-day Adventist family, but later rejected creationism). The author also discusses the continued significance of creationism in the USA today (also see Eve & Harrold 1991). For an interesting contribution discussing, from a cognitive point of view, the reasons why creationism is so successful, see Evans 2000.

<sup>66</sup> In the Christian tradition, Evangelicalism, Pentecostalism, Conservative Protestantism are among the types of movements subsumed under the label fundamentalism.

Appleby 1993a: 2, 1995a: 5-6, Bruce 2000: 10, Antes 2000), but stick to it mainly for the lack of a better word. I will do the same for the moment, but will come back to the issue in the conclusions of this thesis when I discuss whether or not we can usefully think of the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka as ‘fundamentalists’ in the light of the ethnography presented.

The scholarly interest in what is now generally referred to as religious fundamentalism was awakened by the Iranian revolution (Appleby 1997: 1-2) and the growth of the New Christian Right in the United States in the 1980s (see Bruce 1987, 1992, 2000)<sup>67</sup>. Social scientists who write on the subject have mainly analysed how ‘fundamentalists’ relate to tradition and modernity respectively. The main topics of discussion have been the relationship between ‘fundamentalism’, on the one hand, and modernity and modernisation, globalisation, secularisation<sup>68</sup>, rationalisation and rationality<sup>69</sup>, and science<sup>70</sup>, on the other. With regard to these issues, our understanding of phenomena referred to as fundamentalist movements has moved forward significantly in the past twenty years. While, at first, ‘fundamentalists’ were regarded as backward-looking traditionalists, it is now argued by the great majority of analysts that rather than being *anti*-modern, ‘fundamentalists’ are involved in a dynamic interaction with modern values and lifestyles (their enthusiastic use of modern technologies is considered one of the key indicators of this), that they are only *selectively* anti-modern and indeed often guided by modernist values, and that they are future-oriented rather than wanting to halt the march of time and history. As Marty and Appleby have observed, though, some writers still think that fundamentalists are “cultural Neanderthals” (1992: 14) and, in some cases, that they are stupid<sup>71</sup>.

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<sup>67</sup> In contrast to most writers on the subject, Caplan (1987a: 2) as well as Bruce (1992: 45) stress that fundamentalism is not an exclusively contemporary phenomenon.

<sup>68</sup> See Marty and Appleby 1991-1995, Caplan 1987a, Walker 1987, Lawrence 1989, Martin 1990, Harding 1991, 1994, Marty 1992, Coleman, J. 1992, Kaplan 1992b, Lehmann 1998, Maxwell 1998a, Meyer 1998, 1999, Bruce 2000.

<sup>69</sup> Caplan 1987a: 13, Kaplan 1992b: 12-13, Bruce 2000: 16, 116.

<sup>70</sup> See Spuhler 1985, Caplan 1987a: 11-12, Deiros 1991: 179, Mendelsohn 1993, Moore 1993, Tibi 1993, Bruce 2000: 25.

<sup>71</sup> Kaplan uses such expressions as “remnants of irrational traditionalism” (1992b: 13) to describe fundamentalist movements. He further claims that fundamentalists are “a population whose awareness of its own self-interests is *underdeveloped*”(p. 11, emphasis added) and that they fall for fundamentalism “because of its *easily comprehended* appeal” (p. 13, emphasis added). Chowning 1990 portrays the Seventh-day Adventists in Kove, Papua New Guinea, as

It has also been debated whether or not ‘fundamentalist’ movements are of a political nature, in particular in comparison with Latin American liberation theology<sup>72</sup>. Several studies have taken a gender-sensitive perspective<sup>73</sup>.

One aim of these discussions has been to *define* ‘fundamentalism’; the other has been to *explain* its extraordinary recent growth in many different parts of the world including not only the United States but also many countries of the Third World. In fact definition and explanation often overlap significantly.

Many writers have struggled over a definition which is applicable to the great variety of movements subsumed under the label ‘religious fundamentalism’. In an effort not to homogenise these unduly, Marty and Appleby have spoken of “fundamentalist-like” movements (1995a: 16) and, from the beginning of their Fundamentalism Project, they were careful to speak of fundamentalisms in the plural. Caplan advocates the expression “family resemblances” (Caplan 1987a: 4). At the same time as such calls for caution not to define ‘fundamentalism’ too narrowly though, there seems to be a strong consensus concerning the key features of ‘fundamentalist’ movements. Summarising the principal conclusion of their five-volume Fundamentalism Project, the most comprehensive study of ‘fundamentalist’ movements to date, Marty and Appleby write:

“The central substantive similarity among the various movements we identify as fundamentalist is a process of selective retrieval, embellishment, and construction of ‘essentials’ or ‘fundamentals’ of a religious tradition for the purposes of halting the erosion of traditional society and fighting back against the encroachments of secular modernity” (Marty and Appleby 1995: 6).

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equally simple-minded and ignorant. However, such views are indeed remnants of the past and not representative of contemporary writings. Percy, a concerned Christian believer, also thinks of fundamentalists as backward-oriented, yet he does not share Kaplan’s derogatory language (1996: 9-13).

<sup>72</sup> See Deiros 1991, Marty and Appleby 1993a: 8, Stoll 1994, Gifford 1994: 530, Levine 1995: 168-170, Lehmann 1996, Corten 1999: 126-145.

<sup>73</sup> See Ault 1987, Marty and Appleby 1993 (contributions in part 2), Ammerman 1994b: 158-159, Lehmann 1998: 621-626.

Very similar definitions and descriptions of ‘fundamentalist’ movements have been offered by a great number of writers<sup>74</sup>. The most significant element contained in these definitions is the notion of (religious) tradition being under threat, either by internal or external agents. It is argued that the perceived threat to (religious) tradition is the result of rapid socio-economic changes which affect both rural areas and urban centres, if in different ways. These changes are, in turn, due to the impact of globalisation and modernity which have reached even the remotest corners of the world. Threat to tradition implies a loss of identity or a fear of such loss. People who have such a sense of lack of orientation embrace a particular ‘fundamentalist’ religion, it is further argued, as a reaction against the perceived threat to, and an attempt to redefine, their identity in a time of rapid social change.

The disruption of traditional social networks is said to be one particularly significant impact of globalisation. And it is suggested that involvement in a ‘fundamentalist’ movement in many cases provides a substitute for such networks, a new community within which to organise one’s life, and/or at least an imagined new community in another world to come<sup>75</sup>.

‘Fundamentalists’, in short, are defined as “guardians of tradition” (Marty 1992: 19) who react against the impact of modernisation and globalisation and the loss of traditional values and securities. It is, however, not always clear in the literature whether what is to be rescued is a *religious* tradition or *traditional* culture. The two are often blurred and assumed to be one and the same.

In some cases, embracing ‘fundamentalism’ is not a matter of reinforcing one’s *own* tradition perceived to be threatened by the impact of modernisation, but of breaking away from that tradition and embracing another. This is the case for example in many instances of Latin American Evangelicalism supported by people who were formerly Catholics (see Stoll 1994, Ammerman 1994b: 151). The Seventh-day Adventist movement also clearly falls into that category of religious ‘fundamentalism’. Like guardians of ‘traditional tradition’, however, these defenders of a newly adopted tradition are said to react to rapid social change brought about by recent global

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<sup>74</sup> For example Marty 1992: 18-22, Coleman, J. 1992: 77, Ammerman 1994b: 155-156, Masquelier 1999: 222, Bruce 2000: 94.

developments. In both instances, converts attempt to reformulate their identity in a time of loss of traditional identities and securities.

Besides the key definitional feature of fundamentalists as “alert reactors” to modernity (Marty and Appleby 1992: 31), and as “defending and preserving a hallowed identity rooted in religious tradition but now under assault” (Marty and Appleby 1995a: 1), several other aspects of ‘fundamentalist’ movements have been highlighted in the literature. Among them the preoccupation with clear boundaries between friend and foe, between Us and Them – even the intention to “scandalize outsiders” (Marty and Appleby 1992: 23) – which implies a black and white picture of the world<sup>76</sup>. Many analysts further stress that fundamentalist movements are characterised by clear structures of authority and hierarchical leadership<sup>77</sup>. Yet at the same time several researchers have observed that in many cases lay participation is much stronger than that in the mainstream churches<sup>78</sup>. And finally, ‘fundamentalist’ movements are said to be strongly concerned with reinforcing patriarchal gender roles<sup>79</sup>.

In elaborating the core definitions of phenomena labelled ‘fundamentalist’, the writers discussed above already go a long way towards *explaining* their significance in the contemporary world and their recent extraordinary growth. Thus, they, in fact, beg the question by collapsing definition and explanation. In order to explain the attraction of ‘fundamentalist’ movements, social scientists have not only described the “conditions of upheaval and disorientation” (Marty and Appleby 1991a: 823), they have also asked *who* ‘fundamentalism’ appeals to most. The answers focus almost exclusively on the socio-economic position of members of ‘fundamentalist’ movements and, in the great majority of cases, point to people who have become uprooted, dislocated or otherwise disoriented as a result of the impact of globalisation and modernisation upon their lives and social

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<sup>75</sup> See e.g. Martin 1990: 284-286, Deiros 1991: 160, Marty 1992: 21, Maldonado 1993: 234-235, McNeill 1993, Meyer 1998: 340, Corten 1999: 93.

<sup>76</sup> See Caplan 1987a: 13-14, 21, Marty 1992: 21, Marty and Appleby 1991a: 820-21, 1993a: 4. Concerning Seventh-day Adventism: Westermarck 1998. But see Aran’s refreshing article on fundamentalist humour and self-irony for a different view (1995).

<sup>77</sup> See Marty and Appleby 1991: 826-27, Marty 1992: 20, Percy 1996: 166.

<sup>78</sup> See Martin 1990: 292, Maxwell 1998a: 257, Corten 1999: 25, 127, 135. Concerning Seventh-day Adventism: Hoekema 1963: 5, Josephides 1982: 145-154, Westermarck 1998: 56.

<sup>79</sup> See Marty and Appleby 1993 (contributions in part 2), Caplan 1987a: 18, Lawrence 1989: 100, Kaplan 1992b: 8-9, Lehman 1998: 621-626.



environments. Most explanations suggest that people who are particularly likely to convert to 'fundamentalist' movements feel, in some way or other, marginalised within the society in which they live, and that they are attracted to such movements because they perceive them as offering an alternative route to integration and orientation at a time of turmoil. It is the socio-economically weak in particular who are negatively affected by rapid social and economic change, and so it is they especially who seek shelter, guidance and direction in life by embracing 'fundamentalist' religions<sup>80</sup>. Fundamentalist movements, it is argued, provide "answers to the immediate needs of the dispossessed and uprooted", they "[train] the poor in alternative ways of surviving in the midst of chaotic, strangled economies" and "[provide] for the uprooted and alienated a new set of relationships and networks" (Maldonado 1993: 234-35). 'Fundamentalist' religions "often give solace and meaning to the deprived" (Marty 1992: 22). Some authors have pointed out, however, that they often attract people of different social classes<sup>81</sup>. According to Gifford, in situations such as in Ghana where most people are "powerless to confront the socio-political structures of the nation", the individual is offered the possibility to at least "take charge of his or her own private life" when joining one of – in Gifford's terminology – the new churches (Gifford 1994: 531).

In contrast to the situation I analyse in this thesis, most studies of religious 'fundamentalism' are located in *urban* contexts of the Third World (e.g. Caplan 1987b, Martin 1990, Deiros 1991, Corten 1999). In many of these cases, people such as labour migrants to Latin American megacities have been *physically* dislocated and have thus lost the security of the "protective social capsule" of traditional, kinship-based networks (Martin 1990: 284). The need for new social and economic networks would seem particularly great for such persons which is precisely what membership of a 'fundamentalist' movement may provide in such circumstances<sup>82</sup>.

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<sup>80</sup> McNeill 1993: 564, Maldonado 1993: 234.

<sup>81</sup> See Gifford 1994: 516 on "new churches" in Africa. See Stoll (1994) on "neo-Pentecostalism" (1994: 106) in Guatemala. In contrast to most Evangelicals in Latin America, neo-Pentecostals are predominantly members of the upper class, even heads of state. According to Stoll's analysis, their conversion is partly a reaction against Liberation Theology and it is thus not surprising that they embrace a "prosperity gospel" ideology (p. 107). For a critique of the dislocation-crisis-solace model, see Levine 1995.

<sup>82</sup> See Maldonado 1993: 235, Ammerman 1994b:159. Upward social as well as economic mobility of converts to fundamentalist movements has been noted by several observers (Maxwell 1998b: 369, Corten 1999: 106). Concerning Seventh-day Adventism see Poewe 1978:

Converts in situations other than migration, however, are said to be *mentally* disoriented due to the impact of modernisation upon their traditional life style and identity (see e.g. Westermarck 1998 on Adventism in Papua New Guinea). Many studies take a bird's-eye perspective including both urban and rural contexts of particular countries or regions<sup>83</sup>.

Like many studies in other fields<sup>84</sup>, some authors have interpreted religious 'fundamentalism' as a form of counterhegemonic resistance<sup>85</sup>.

The focus on socio-economic factors within contemporary models of explanation of religious 'fundamentalism' is perhaps not surprising if we take into account that most studies of 'fundamentalist' movements are triggered by, and foremost concerned with, their recent growth. Thus the explanation of their success, it is argued, must lie in the specific socio-economic circumstances of the modern world.

In contexts of the industrialised world, in particular the USA, psychological models of explanation enjoy more popularity with analysts of 'fundamentalism' (along the lines of: 'fundamentalists are people with problems who search for new meaning in their lives')<sup>86</sup>.

The majority of analyses of *Christian* 'fundamentalism' in the Third World concern Evangelicalism or Pentecostalism in Latin America. These studies – with the exception of Levine (1995) to a certain extent – are very much in line with the general approach to 'fundamentalist' movements in the available literature focussing on converts' socio-economic situation and Christian 'fundamentalism' as either a tool of empowerment or reformulation of identity. Many of these studies suggest that poor, illiterate persons – the typical converts to Latin American manifestations of religious 'fundamentalism' – are alienated by any focus on intellectual engagement, speech or text, but feel attracted to Evangelicalism/Pentecostalism because of the emphasis on

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316-17, Ross 1978: 179, 195, Lewellen 1979, Josephides 1982: 166, Nyaundi 1997: 214-17, Westermarck 1998: 56, 60.

<sup>83</sup> E.g. Stoll 1990 on Evangelicalism in Latin America; Rose and Schultze 1993 on Evangelicalism in Guatemala; Maldonado 1993 on Conservative Protestantism in Brazil, Venezuela and Ecuador; Deiros 1991 on Protestant Fundamentalism in Latin America; McNeill 1993 on Guatemala and the USA; Levine 1995 on Protestants and Catholics in Latin America.

<sup>84</sup> See Comaroff 1985, Boddy 1989: 340-45.

<sup>85</sup> Caplan 1987b, Deiros 1991.

<sup>86</sup> E.g. Ault 1987 on the Baptists in Massachusetts; Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980 on Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgium, Dericquebourg 1977 on Jehovah's Witnesses in France.

songs and emotional experience<sup>87</sup>. Many studies discuss these charismatic forms of Christianity in view of the failures of Liberation Theology claiming that while Liberation Theology exhibited “emotion *for* the poor”, it failed to reach the “emotion[s] *of* the poor” (Corten 1999: 147)<sup>88</sup>. In fact, spiritual and emotional experience seems to be at the core of movements in the Pentecostal tradition, perhaps even more so than a concern to guard or defend any particular tradition.

According to Gifford (1994: 514, 526), very little research has been conducted on contemporary forms of African Christianity in general, despite the “mushrooming of new churches” (Gifford 1994: 515) of which the Seventh-day Adventist is clearly counted as one (Gifford 1994: 521, 527). If new forms of Christianity are considered in the African context, then it is predominantly religious groups in the Pentecostalist tradition which are studied<sup>89</sup>. Pentecostal forms of Christianity seem to be so prominent and immensely successful on the African continent, that Gifford even talks of the “pentecostalization” of African Christianity (1994: 524). These developments are analysed, as elsewhere, in the context of “increasing social, political and economic collapse” (Gifford 1994: 514) of African postcolonial nations.

The vast majority of studies which concern religious ‘fundamentalism’ in general and Christian ‘fundamentalism’ in particular take a special interest in sociological, historical and political issues. Very few studies are written from a specifically anthropological point of view and only few of these discuss a *Christian* ‘fundamentalist’ movement<sup>90</sup>. Among these, the work of Susan Harding – which, however, concerns modern America – is in my view outstanding (1987, 1991, 1992, 1994, 2000). The main

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<sup>87</sup> Deiros 1991: 179-80, Martin 1990: 231, Corten 1999: 25-67. Caplan (1987b: 172) makes the same point in regard to Christian fundamentalism in urban India.

<sup>88</sup> Martin 1990, Stoll 1990, Deiros 1991, Maldonado 1993, Rose and Schultze 1993, Stoll 1994, Levine 1995, Corten 1999.

<sup>89</sup> See the special issue on Pentecostalism of the *Journal of Religion in Africa* 1998, Vol. XXVIII, No. 3. Also Gifford 1998.

<sup>90</sup> The volume edited by Caplan (1987) is, as far as I am aware, the only collection of essays on religious fundamentalism which takes a specifically anthropological point of view. Two contributions deal with Christian fundamentalist movements, one (by Bruce) concerns the New Christian Right in the US, the other (by Caplan) concerns South India. Within the five volumes of the Fundamentalism Project (Marty and Appleby 1991-1995), anthropologists have made thirteen contributions. Out of these, four concern Christian fundamentalist movements (Ginsburg 1993 on the abortion debate in the USA, Harding 1994 on notions of history among American Baptists, Stoll 1994 on Evangelicalism in Guatemala, Peacock and Pettyjohn 1995 on a comparison between the narratives of four leaders of Christian and other movements).

focus of Harding's work is the power of narratives among Baptists in the United States, and as such it offers very subtle and interesting analyses. Unfortunately though, Harding focusses almost entirely on the rhetoric of leaders and on public discourse. This is also true for other anthropologists who have discussed Christian 'fundamentalism' (Stoll 1994, Peacock and Pettyjohn 1995).

The context I discuss in this thesis is different to most analyses of (Christian) 'fundamentalism' in at least two respects. First, as I have already pointed out, Seventh-day Adventism in the area of Maroantsetra is a predominantly rural phenomenon<sup>91</sup>. Second, my analysis is based on long-term participant observation among *ordinary* members of the Seventh-day Adventist church whose perspective and experience is disturbingly absent in the literature.

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<sup>91</sup> Gifford mentions an interesting detail in his comparison of different churches in Ghana. In contrast to Pentecostal churches, the New Apostolic Church in Ghana is very "sober, almost dour, with solemn hymns", very much "less flamboyant" than denominations in the Pentecostal tradition. While interestingly, Pentecostalism is a predominantly urban phenomenon, members of the New Apostolic Church are mainly rural people (1994: 527-528). It is also interesting to note that in Ghana, it is not the Pentecostal churches with their emphasis on emotional experience which attract the poor as often claimed to be the case in Latin America, but a church with a much more sober style of service.

## PART ONE

### People, and their social context

#### Chapter 2

#### People in search of a living (*Ôlo mitady*)

Of the 19 months of fieldwork I conducted among the Seventh-day Adventists in the district of Maroantsetra, I spent roughly two thirds of my time in Maroantsetra town and one third in the village of Sahameloka located some 25 km upriver to the north of the town. I will first introduce Maroantsetra and its history and then move on to present the village of Sahameloka.

#### **Maroantsetra: People on the move**

The history of the region of Maroantsetra is comparatively well documented because it has been at the crossroads of people's movements across the Indian Ocean for centuries. This is due to its location in Antongil Bay, Madagascar's largest and best natural harbour (see map 2).

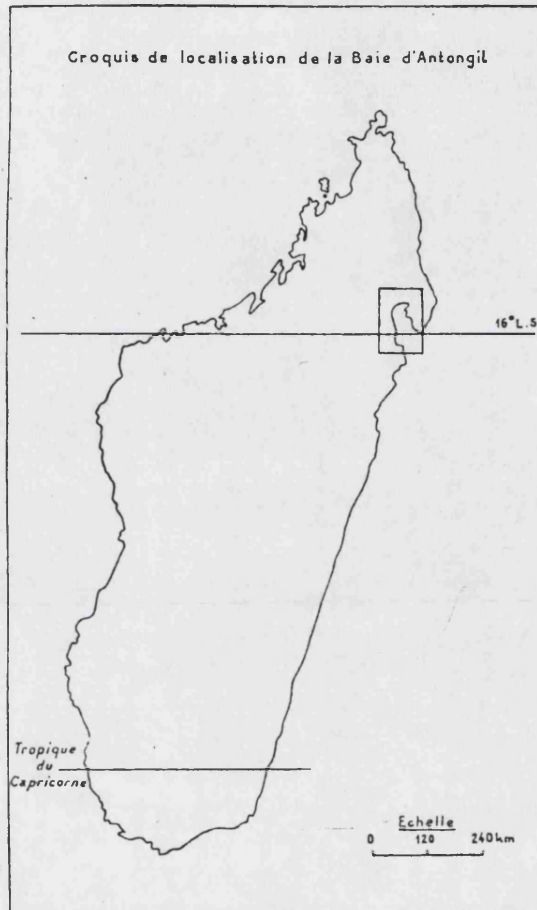
The earliest contacts with European traders are recorded for the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. We know that Antongil Bay was a major refuge for pirates of the Indian Ocean in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century (Grey 1933: 50-70, Decary 1935: 7-15, Deschamps 1949: 131). We also know that it was a point of anchorage for cross-continental slave traders between the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, at certain points, Antongil Bay seems to have been the most important region for such trade<sup>1</sup>. Piracy and slave trade were in fact closely linked (Ellis, W. 1848: 34-63, 144-145)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Grandidier 1907: 242-247, 278-285, 327-330; 1913: 52-54; Drouhard 1926, Filliot 1974: 130-132, Vérin 1986: 103-104, Ellis & Randrianja 2000: 56-58, 72-73, Larson 2000: 132-134, 140, Razoharinoro-Randriamboavonjy 2000: 19-21, 24, 25. According to Vérin, the zenith of the involvement of Antongil Bay in the slave trade was in the first part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century; according to Filliot, it was between 1720 and 1770.

<sup>2</sup> Apart from the region's involvement in piracy and slave trade, the region of Antongil Bay played a significant role in what has become known as the 'Betsimisaraka Confederation' (Esoavelomandroso 1979: 44), a short-lived unification of a number of chiefdoms along the east

Map 2. Location of Antongil Bay (in: Petit 1967: 22)



While slave trade involving the northwestern regions of Madagascar had already been going on for a long time, the east coast became involved at the time of European interest in the Mascarenes (Mauritius, La Réunion) to the east of Madagascar (Larson 2000: 120). Since these lacked an indigenous population, the colonial economies there relied on trade with nearby Madagascar both for labour and food. Madagascar's east

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coast in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. For details see Grandidier, G. 1898, Decary 1935: 6-7, Deschamps 1949: 215-223, Esoavelomandroso 1979: 41-48, Sylla 1985, Mangalaza 1994: chapter 2, Cole 2001: 37-39.

In the 1770s, a bizarre figure turned up in Maroantsetra: Baron de Benyowsky, a Hungarian count of Polish origin who fantasised about gaining power over large parts of Madagascar in the name of the French king; Maroantsetra was the centre of his imaginary power (Benyowsky 1772, 1904, Ellis, W. 1848: 64-92, Simyan 1933, Sicard 1981). His importance, however, was more a product of his imagination than reality, and his memory has sunk into oblivion even among the most educated local people.

coast was heavily involved in this trade providing the colonies with slaves, rice and cattle in exchange for various European goods and money. Antongil Bay was one of several locations along the east coast where Malagasy and Europeans engaged in such trade, but it was only at the beginning of this trade that it played an important role (Filliot 1974: 130-132, Esoavelomandroso 1979: 202-203, Larson 2000, Razoharinoro-Randriamboavonjy 2000). The captives sold as plantation workers to the Mascarenes “were largely victims of conflict among the coastal chiefdoms of eastern Madagascar” (Larson 2000: 138) which were in continuous dispute over the control of the east coast and in particular its ports.

But local chiefs not only sold Malagasy slaves to foreign traders, the Betsimisaraka are also reported to have gone on regular slave capturing raids to the Comores to the northwest of Madagascar as well as the east African coast in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Deschamps 1949: 224-29, Deschamps 1960: 107-108, Petit 1967: 32, Filliot 1974: 153-158, Fanony 1975: 81, Vérin 1986: 122-130)<sup>3</sup>. This was the time when the demand for slaves on the Mascarenes was highest due to increased economic activities there (Larson 2000: 139).

However, there is not only a long history of the involvement of many Malagasy – as slaves as well as slave traders – in the cross-continental slave trade (see Shepherd 1980, Campbell 1984, Mosca 2000, Larson 2000), but also of *internal* systems of slavery in many parts of Madagascar (Ellis, W. 1848: 144)<sup>4</sup>. Regarding the area of Maroantsetra, what we know goes back to the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when a group from western Madagascar conquered the area and enslaved large parts of the local population. It is the

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<sup>3</sup> According to the historical sources cited in Vérin (1986: 122-130), especially Froeberville (1845), the Malagasy fleet – which consisted of Betsimisaraka and Sakalava groups – was up to 18,000 men strong who crossed the sea in large outrigger canoes, up to 500 in number at a time. Upon their arrival in the Comoro Islands and on the eastern African shore, they captured great numbers of slaves which they later sold to European traders. These raids are reported to have been disastrous for the invaded towns and villages. Although Antongil Bay did not play a central role, its population was clearly involved in these expeditions. Fanony studying his home village a hundred kilometres south of Maroantsetra collected oral history confirming such slave raids to the Comores and even east Africa (Fanony 1975: 80-81).

<sup>4</sup> The nature of what has been called ‘slavery’ in Madagascar at different times and in different Malagasy societies is, however, very heterogeneous. Enslavement could imply very different degrees of hardship as well as a variety of types of status (see Bloch 1980, Shepherd 1980, Feeley-Harnik 1982, Ellis, S. 1985, Domenichini-Ramiaramanana 1999).

aspect of internal systems of slavery which is most relevant for the purpose of the present thesis.

Sometime between 1700 and 1730, a group of noble Sakalava warriors from northwestern Madagascar – called Zafindrabay, literally: ‘the grandchildren of Rabay’<sup>5</sup> – invaded the area of Maroantsetra (crossing the island’s northern tip, roughly 250 km) and took control over it for the next hundred years. To my knowledge, the only written sources of information on the Zafindrabay are (apart from a two-page description of Zafindrabay burial grounds and funerary customs by Pont 1930) an article by Michel Petit, a French geographer, published in 1967 and a couple of pages in a lengthy geographical study on the area by the same author (Petit 1966), and scattered pieces of information in the few works referred to by him<sup>6</sup>.

Within a relatively short time, and it seems with little local resistance, the Zafindrabay managed to conquer the two major valleys of the area (the Antanambalana valley and the Andranofotsy valley) and to establish a centre of power at the entrance of each. One of these centres is the historical antecedent of Maroantsetra town. Placing their sons as their representatives in villages along the rivers of either valley, the Zafindrabay governed the entire area with ease. They demanded tributes from the more powerful groups they encountered; the rest of the population, too weak to resist their invasion, they enslaved (also Pont 1930). Some chose the option of flight. According to one of my informants, people who nowadays live in very remote villages in the thick forest are descendants of those who fled the Zafindrabay<sup>7</sup>. In some areas of no interest to the Zafindrabay, the population remained free.

People in the area, young and old, ‘remember’ the Zafindrabay for their cruelty; they allegedly fed their slaves to crocodiles on regular, ritual occasions (Pont 1930 also

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<sup>5</sup> They probably originated from the Sambirano river to the south of Ambanja (Petit 1966: 29).

<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, the ethnographic information on the Zafindrabay is taken from Petit 1966 and 1967. His sources are unfortunately not always clear. Petit seems to have had only very few written sources – not all of whom he explicitly acknowledges – to rely on. Most of the information seems to be based on oral history.

<sup>7</sup> Vérin, citing Froberville (1845: 122), notes that the invasion of the Zafindrabay caused a great deal of migration among the local population towards the northeast (1986: 115).



makes this point)<sup>8</sup>. Other than that, little or nothing is known<sup>9</sup>. Perhaps the Zafindrabay's regime was particularly harsh, but the institution of slavery was not new in the area of Maroantsetra. One account from 1664 reports that every day, both slaves and free people had to give food as tribute to a local king who ruled over sixty villages of the area (cited in Grandidier 1907: 327-330). However, the historical sources do not tell us what exactly it meant to be a slave under different rulers.

Although the Zafindrabay ruled the area during the period when trade with the Mascarenes was at its peak (1770-1820), there is no evidence to suggest that they sold their slaves. Rather, they made them work as agricultural labourers, transforming the valleys they controlled into massive rice fields and vastly extending already existing rice production. The particular technique employed for preparing the land demanded an enormous amount of labour.

The slaves either lived on the outskirts of villages ruled by the Zafindrabay or else in separate villages nearby. However, they were buried alongside their owners in one of the two big graveyards the Zafindrabay had established close to each of their centres. This was so because the number of slaves demonstrated the power of the different Zafindrabay subgroups. I will come back to this point below.

During the first two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Merina of the Malagasy highlands conquered large parts of Madagascar including the area of Maroantsetra (Esoavelomandroso 1979: 48-54). Thus in the early 1820s, the Zafindrabay lost their status as local rulers (Dandouau and Chapus 1936: 87-93, Petit 1967: 34). However, as Petit points out, the social stratification remained basically the same, because the Merina collaborated with the Zafindrabay in ruling the rest of the population (Petit 1967: 34-35).

In 1896 Madagascar became a French colony and, as a result, slavery was officially abolished. However, as during Merina rule over much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Zafindrabay were once again integrated into the new administrative system (also Cole 2001: 45). The French not only respected Zafindrabay property, but, according to oral

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<sup>8</sup> Feeley-Harnik (1991: 262) has found very similar collective memories concerning a Zafinifotsy ruler among her informants in Analalava which is very close to the region where the Zafindrabay probably originated.

<sup>9</sup> Local memory of the Zafindrabay has recently been investigated by a student at the University of Toamasina (himself a Zafindrabay descendant from Sahameloka). Unfortunately though, he

history I gathered, registered them as legal owners of their land. Hence the freed slaves remained as landless and poor as they had been before manumission. Many ex-slaves continued to work as share-croppers for their old owners, and in the 1960s, Petit finds these people to be in a situation of a “*prolétariat miséreux*” (1967: 37). Other ex-slaves, however, cleared forest for cultivation and founded their own villages, in particular along the middle and upper parts of the Andranofotsy river where Sahameloka is located. The first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were marked by such activities of ex-slaves or descendants of slaves. However, the only land they could make their own was land which the Zafindrabay had not yet claimed and been made the legal owners of by the French colonial administration. That was basically poor land or land difficult to cultivate. Up to this day, the descendants of the Zafindrabay are said to have the best land in the area – although I was also told that they have sold some of their land to other people – and to occupy most important positions in Maroantsetra town.

The Malagasy revolt against French colonial rule in 1947 did not reach the area of Maroantsetra (Tronchon 1986: 46, 50, 64). However, a small number of local men, whose names are commemorated at a small monument in town, seem to have joined the rebels further south. In 1960, Madagascar became an independent state. After a neo-colonial period under changing governments, the island became a Socialist Republic in 1975 and has, apart from a brief intermezzo, been governed by the same president ever since<sup>10</sup>. At the time of my fieldwork, the local government in Maroantsetra was in the firm grip of president Ratsiraka’s political party (AREMA).

After this overview of the district’s history, let us now look at what kind of place Maroantsetra town is at present. The district of Maroantsetra is surrounded by thick tropical forest. This has led to its isolation in terms of access and transport which is in fact the district’s main problem hindering its economic development. The geographical isolation of the region of Maroantsetra has been the concern of pre-colonial agents investigating the area (see Cachin 1867), French colonial administrators and subsequent

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had at the time of the submission of this thesis not yet finished his research, so that his data was not available to me.

<sup>10</sup> Presidential elections were held in December 2001. The outcome was, however, disputed and still unclear at the time of the submission of this thesis.

Malagasy governments alike<sup>11</sup>. According to the available documents and oral history, the situation has been steadily deteriorating over the past decades. Northwards, eastwards and westwards from town one can only travel either on foot or by canoe. A very poor road, only passable in a four-wheel-drive during the so-called dry season – in fact not dry at all – between about October and April, links Maroantsetra with Toamasina (Tamatave), Madagascar's second largest town, to the south. The 'dry' and the wet season are sometimes jokingly referred to as *la saison des pluies* (the season of the rains) as opposed to *la saison pluvieuse* (the rainy season). Both are wet, the only difference being that during *la saison des pluies* the water comes down in sudden tropical rainstorms in the late afternoon and evening, while in the *saison pluvieuse* it basically drizzles all day long and is rather cold and miserable. But even in the 'dry' season, the journey along the 'Route Nationale no. 5' is extremely bumpy and strenuous and it takes at least three days to put the 400 kilometres behind you. Matters are not helped by the fact that the coast is transected by over a hundred small rivers between Maroantsetra and Toamasina. There is a small local airport just outside Maroantsetra town with almost daily flights to different parts of Madagascar, but this option of travelling is beyond the economic means of the great majority of the population. The most important means of transport is by sea, but as a means of travel, boat trips to and from Toamasina are expensive, and neither frequent nor regarded as particularly safe.

Despite its physical isolation, however, Maroantsetra became an administrative centre under the French. After independence in 1960, it was transformed into a district capital. As both, it attracted migrants from near and far.

“There aren't many children of the land (*zanatany*) here.

People come from other places to walk around, to settle down,  
to look for work.”

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<sup>11</sup> See Monographies de la Sous-Préfecture de Maroantsetra 1950-1970, Archives Nationales, Antananarivo

These are the words of one of Feeley-Harnik's informants speaking about "Analalava and such places" (Feeley-Harnik 1991: 231)<sup>12</sup>. Maroantsetra town is one such place. Indeed in many respects, it is very similar to Analalava, a town in western Madagascar of similar size to Maroantsetra (see Feeley-Harnik 1991: Chapter 5). In 1997, Maroantsetra including adjacent villages<sup>13</sup> counted some 20,000 inhabitants; 40% of them were children under the age of fifteen<sup>14</sup>.

At first sight, Maroantsetra does not have a particularly urban feel to it. Much of it looks like a very big village. At second sight though, life in Maroantsetra is clearly very different from life in a village such as Sahameloka. This is a direct result of its history and present role as administrative centre.

Maroantsetra stretches about one kilometre from west to east and the same length from north to south. Its streets are basically arranged in a chequer-board pattern, a heritage from French colonial administration. Apart from one paved road which begins at the local airport and ends in the centre of town (this is the only paved road within a radius of several hundred kilometres), the different neighbourhoods and courtyards which make up the town are connected by wide sand-streets lined with large litchi, coconut and other trees. Behind these are hidden people's small, slightly raised houses which are made of parts of the local palm tree (*ravenala*) and split bamboo. The paved road runs right through the centre of town and divides the administrative area from the market and the bulk of the residential area.

The administrative area consists of old colonial buildings which now house the district administration and local ministries of the Malagasy state, such as the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Population, the police station and the customs office. There is also a prison and a fairly big hospital on this side of the road. The conditions in the hospital, however, testify to the district's economic situation: many beds lack a mattress;

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<sup>12</sup> Despite the massive size of the island, all inhabitants speak dialects of one language – Malagasy, an Austronesian language closely related to a language spoken in Borneo – which are, in almost all cases, mutually intelligible for native speakers.

<sup>13</sup> The statistics provided by the local Ministry of Population are divided into the *Commune Urbaine* (Urban Community) including Maroantsetra town and 13 other communities many of which have, geographically speaking, merged with Maroantsetra, and the *Commune Rurale* (Rural Community) comprising all the other villages in the *Sous-Préfecture de Maroantsetra* (District of Maroantsetra).

<sup>14</sup> Unpublished statistics provided by the local Ministry of Population.

what mattresses there are, are old and often blood-stained; in most rooms there is no running water; the toilets do not work so that patients' relatives have to bring buckets. More importantly, many basic medical facilities are not available, not to speak of the shortage of trained personnel. Also on this side of the paved road, there is a football pitch where matches are played quite regularly and where the annual celebration of Malagasy Independence Day takes place.

Along the central road are mainly shops run by Malagasy-Indians (Karany) of whom there were almost a hundred in the district, most of them in Maroantsetra town, at the time of my fieldwork. All sorts of mostly imported goods such as cloth, plastic buckets, travel bags, toilet paper, torches, batteries, but also more expensive items like bicycles and tape recorders, are sold there. Apart from such shops, there is a bank, a pharmacy, an Air Madagascar office, the local radio station as well as the town's large Community Hall (*tanom-pokonolona*). Further out along the road are a couple of French-owned cash crop exporting firms. Cash crops, in particular cloves, are one of the main economic resources of the district.

On the other side of the central road lies the daily market which is very lively. People, mostly women, come from near and far to sell their produce or catch: rice, fish (fresh and dried), shrimps, crustaceans, many different kinds of leaves and some tropical fruit according to the season. Some people sell expensive vegetables like tomatoes, runner beans, garlic and onions which do not grow in the area due to its extremely wet climate (4m annual rainfall), but are brought in by air or shipped from Toamasina. Honey, milk, oil, bread and snacks such as fried dough balls are also sold at the market. Virtually until the end of my fieldwork, when the town's mayor decided that people actually had to have a market *stand*, most women sold their goods on sheets of plastic spread out on the sand, sitting on the ground and nursing their babies, occasionally splashing their leaves with water or chasing away the flies from their meat or fish with a leaf-frond. There is also an open market-hall where men behind concrete counters sell meat. Parts of animal carcasses covered in flies hang from hooks behind them, and there is a strong smell in the hall and a continuous sound of butchers chopping up meat.

But not only food is sold at the market. There are long lines of stands where people sell cheap goods such as plastic slippers, buttons and thread, pens and soap. And

there is a special area for products such as baskets, hats and sitting mats which are made locally out of different natural fibres. And finally, leading away from the market into the residential areas, there are long lines of shelters where people – most of them originating from the more affluent highlands of Madagascar – sell second-hand Western clothes. Adjacent to the market, there is an area where *taxi-brousse* – pick-ups carrying patient passengers across Madagascar – assemble while waiting for people travelling south along the bumpy ‘Route nationale no. 5’.

On this side of the paved road there are only very few administrative buildings: the district court, the Town Hall (*Commune Urbaine*) and the post office which also houses surprisingly efficient national and international telephone facilities. Located centrally as well are the massive Catholic and, somewhat smaller, Protestant and Adventist churches, as well as a small, wooden mosque for the local Malagasy-Indians who are all Muslims. Public and church-run schools are strewn across town.

Behind all the activity in and around the market is the vast residential area of Maroantsetra which makes up its bulk. As I mentioned, it consists of small palm-thatched houses and wide, criss-crossing sand-streets partly overshadowed by massive trees. People tend to live in kin-based settlement arrangements, so that Maroantsetra is made up of many small compounds consisting of related households, often centred on a common draw-well.

At the outskirts of town, located by the harbour, there is a mini-industrial area. Enterprises which operate there are either engaged in boat building and maintenance and associated activities such as producing lumber, or else in shipping cargo to Toamasina (Madagascar’s international port). One yard used to be a processing site for ebony, but this market has almost died out.

Still further out, on the way to the beach, one encounters two hotel complexes, one of them an American-owned first class hotel which has only recently opened. Renting one of its picturesque bungalows for one night costs as much as a local teacher earns in a month. The other one, which used to be Maroantsetra’s best hotel, was at the time of my fieldwork owned by the wife of the town’s mayor. Maroantsetra is located at the edge of the Masoala peninsula which is the largest patch of tropical forest left in Madagascar and which has recently been declared a National Park. A tiny, offshore

island close to Maroantsetra (Nosy Mangabe) has long been a natural reserve inhabited only by a team of researchers. The area principally attracts eco-tourists interested in hiking across the forest or observing lemurs in the wild. Whale-watching has become the most recent attraction. An American environmental NGO, in cooperation with a Malagasy organisation<sup>15</sup>, controls and runs the National Park and provides local guides and tours. Their office is located in the town centre, and so are a number of simpler hotels for tourists on a small budget and Malagasy travellers. However, not many tourists come to Maroantsetra and they hardly venture into town except for organising a trip to one of the nature reserves.

Scattered across town, but concentrated in the central area, are dozens of little stalls where mostly women and young girls sell home-made snacks and fruit holding up umbrellas to protect their produce from both sun and rain. Little 'corner shops' sell daily necessities such as washing powder, soap and biscuits.

Another feature of Maroantsetra town is leisure time entertainment. Apart from the local radio station which many people in the countryside listen to as well, there are several restaurants (*hotely*) and bars as well as a number of video clubs showing films (mostly action) at the weekend. Moreover, there is a disco owned by a Frenchman who has lived in Maroantsetra for many years. A public TV outside the Town Hall attracts a crowd of people almost every evening. Radio and TV are the channels through which people can receive news of the outside world; there are no newspapers available in town.

The urban character of Maroantsetra becomes particularly visible on a Sunday when there is a distinctive Sunday atmosphere. Groups of people dressed in their smartest clothes stroll up and down the main road and down to the beach, buying snacks here and there, chatting and standing around. The purpose of such activity is quite obviously to see and to be seen, a Sunday entertainment unthinkable in a village.

In contrast to people who live in villages and largely rely on subsistence farming, people who live in town need quite substantial amounts of money. Most of Maroantsetra's residents, as far as I know, live on land belonging to themselves or their

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<sup>15</sup> The World Conservation Society (WCS) in cooperation with ANGAP.

kin and thus do not have to pay rent. But they need to buy at least part of their daily rice<sup>16</sup> as well as other food and goods such as sitting mats which people in villages make themselves. If a house in town needs repairing, material must be bought rather than collected in the forest. For families who have to pay a monthly rent on top of all the other expenses, life in town can be very difficult indeed<sup>17</sup>. And of course, town life creates the need for money. For example, it creates the need to buy the appropriate clothes to go strolling around on Sunday afternoons.

I have said at the beginning of this section that as an administrative centre Maroantsetra has attracted migrants from near and far. As Feeley-Harnik writes about Analalava, “people moved from rural villages into the post [a place like Analalava or Maroantsetra], because they had to supplement subsistence farming with some form of wage labor” (1991: 261). The great majority of the residents of Maroantsetra town are people whose family originates from one of the rural communities of the district<sup>18</sup>. This is reflected in the fact that there are very few burial grounds in Maroantsetra town, because most inhabitants are brought back to the village of their patrilineal ancestry when they die. The biggest burial ground is in fact that of the ‘guests/migrants’ (*vahiny*) to whom I shall turn shortly. People with roots in the countryside who live in town remain in close contact with their place of origin to which they regularly return (sometimes for several months at a time) in order to help their kin with agricultural work, and where many of them still own rice fields and forest land. At the same time, their presence in town makes it easier for their kin, based in the countryside, to come to Maroantsetra for a visit or in order to look for some kind of cash income. Support by kin

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<sup>16</sup> Although I do not have any statistics on this, my impression is that only a relatively small minority of Maroantsetra’s residents are full-time farmers. They mostly live on the outskirts of town close to their fields.

<sup>17</sup> People who have to pay rent are likely not to have any kin either in town or one of the district’s villages and so they also have to buy all the rice they eat, which is a lot if you are Malagasy.

<sup>18</sup> 95,5% of the district population is registered as Betsimisaraka, the ‘ethnic group’ which occupies much of the east coast including the district of Maroantsetra (unpublished statistics provided by the Ministry of Population in Maroantsetra for 1997). Unfortunately, there were no separate statistics available concerning Maroantsetra town only, or the number of Antimaroa, that is Betsimisaraka from the district of Maroantsetra. Thus some of the people registered as Betsimisaraka may be migrants from other places along the east coast.



is also vital in other situations such as serious illness, because the hospital provides neither food and sheets, nor a nurse to wash the patients.

But migrants have also come from many other areas of Madagascar, and even beyond, some of them generations ago, some of them more recently. Together, they only make up some 4,5 % of the district's current population<sup>19</sup>, and probably a little more in Maroantsetra town. And people continue to come and go, some of them, such as policemen and other government representatives, as well as Seventh-day Adventist pastors, because they are allocated to work in Maroantsetra for a limited period of time. Others move on because they see a brighter future elsewhere. But many of the firmly rooted residents in Maroantsetra town also move about quite a bit going away for months, and even years, at times, to other places, sometimes for study, sometimes to do business or to visit relatives.

Although people with origins in the district of Maroantsetra make up the great majority of its population, the impact of migrants from elsewhere is not negligible. Because it gives Maroantsetra an atmosphere of a distinctively urban place where all sorts of people meet, interact and live with each other and where the population is in constant flux. And both temporary and settled migrants link the town to the outside world.

Some migrant groups – in particular the Malagasy-Indians and the Merina and Betsileo from the highlands – remain distinct groups because they do not intermarry with local people, while others, such as the Tsimihety, have blended in with the local population through intermarriage over generations and have 'disappeared' as a distinct group.

There are hundreds of ways in which people who live in Maroantsetra town make a living. And there are obvious and undeniable disparities between different socio-

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<sup>19</sup> In 1997 the migrant groups were, in numerically descending order: a large number of Tsimihety from nearby areas (4600 out of a total of 6700 migrants), and much smaller numbers of Antaimoro, Sainte-Mariens, Merina, Betsileo, Makoa, Malagasy-Indians, Malagasy-Chinese, Comorians and French. (When I lived in Maroantsetra there were almost a dozen French – with one exception retired men who had married local women, mostly much younger than themselves, and had settled down in the town for the foreseeable future.)

The Malagasy-Indians have been present in the area since 1902, the Malagasy-Chinese, since 1908 (Petit 1964: 44). The strong presence of the Tsimihety has been noted since at least 1923

economic classes. Although none of the migrant groups, except for the Tsimihety, are numerically significant, some of them – the Malagasy-Indians, the Malagasy-Chinese and to a lesser extent the Merina, as well as the French residents and absent enterprise owners – are economically very powerful<sup>20</sup>. The economic power of these groups is based on their control of trade with the world beyond Maroantsetra. They control both the export of cash crops (mainly cloves and litchis, but also vanilla and coffee) and the import of goods from Europe, America and Asia<sup>21</sup>. The relative wealth of these groups is perfectly visible: they can be seen in the local bank; some of them have cars; they have large houses which are built of cement or solid wood rather than palm tree material and are equipped with electricity and running water. Only very few other households have electric light and none I have seen possess running water.

The economic power of these groups – with the exception of the Malagasy-Chinese – is not, however, linked to political power. But there is another economic elite in town that is closely linked to local politics, namely the descendants of the Zafindrabay. Their economic strength is not only founded on enterprise in town, but also largely on landholdings throughout the district. It is just as difficult to find out who descends from the Zafindrabay as it is to establish who descends from their slaves, because there is a strong stigma attached to both origins. However, it is clear that one local ancestry in particular, who is clearly of Zafindrabay descent, holds both considerable political and economic power in Maroantsetra and beyond. Political power, however, lies not entirely in their hands, but is shared with the Malagasy-Chinese. It was from among their ranks that the town's mayor came at the time of my fieldwork. The Karany (Malagasy-Indians), Merina and French stay away from local politics.

A substantial number of Maroantsetra's residents, many more than those involved in import-export trade, have jobs in the local administration. But although they have the advantage of receiving a regular salary, it is often insufficient to pay for a family's needs and is thus supplemented by many different kinds of activities such as

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(Poirier 1923). The following other migrant groups were also already present in 1923: Merina, Antaimoro, Makoa, Sihanaka, Saint-Mariens, Anjouanais (Poirier 1923: 145).

<sup>20</sup> In 1997, 94 Karany (Malagasy-Indians) lived in the district of Maroantsetra, 46 Malagasy-Chinese, 382 Merina and 16 French people. Almost all of these lived in town.

<sup>21</sup> There also seems to be a small amount of quartz trade going on which however, as far as I know, is in the hands of people with local origins.

women sewing or weaving baskets. Also a large number of people make a living either by selling products in the market, or snacks at one of the many little stalls scattered along the streets, while others work as carpenters or builders or have jobs in the boat- or tourist-industry. Some young girls and boys are employees with one of the Karany families working both as domestic aids and shop assistants.

While a civil servant's monthly salary was between 300,000 and 400,000 Francs Malgaches (£30-40) at the time of my fieldwork, a fish woman at the market could make as much as 50,000-70,000 Fmg (£5-7) on an exceptionally good day. A woman selling snacks or leaves at the market probably earned around 10,000 Fmg (£1) a day. A girl working for a Karany family, in contrast, received as little as 25,000 Fmg (£2,5) per *month* plus board and lodging<sup>22</sup>.

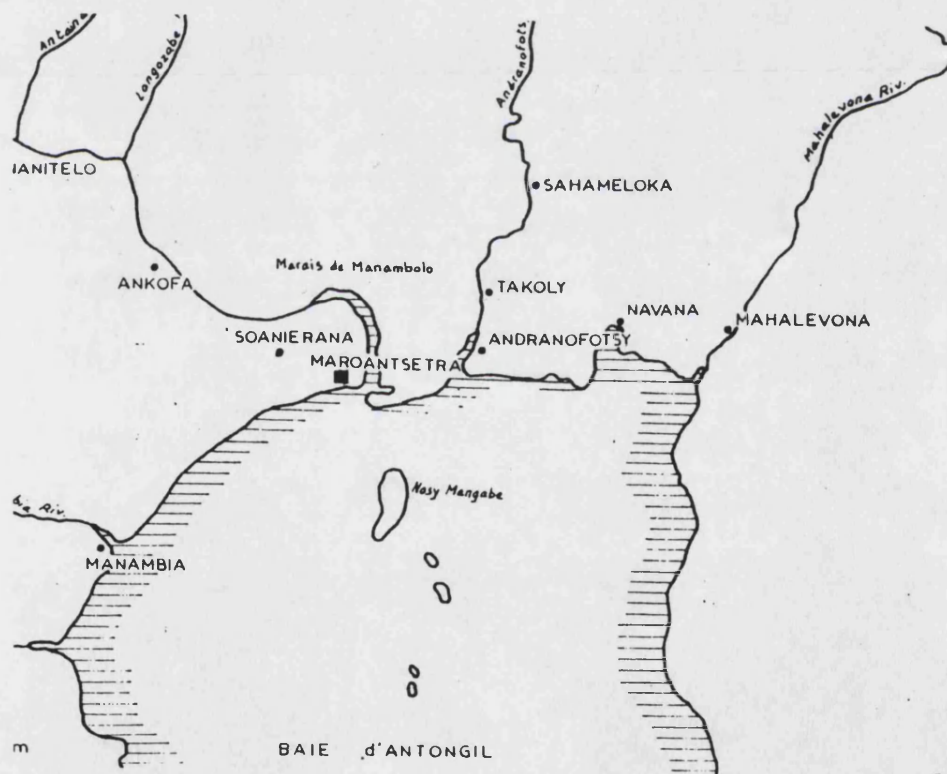
The members of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Maroantsetra town are on the whole perfectly average inhabitants, if there is such a thing. In 1998-2000, three had jobs in the post office, one (Papan' i Beby) in an office associated with the local ministry of agriculture, a couple of them worked as teachers, one as a carpenter, one as a mechanic, several women sold food or clothes at the market, some church members were rice farmers (one family of slave descent worked mostly as share croppers), and many made a living doing this and that like many other people in Maroantsetra. And, like most other people in town, church members remained in close contact with non-Adventist, and in some cases Adventist, kin in their villages of origin, a point I will come back to in chapter 6. I will also say more on the background and the socio-economic position of church members in the next chapter. Suffice it to say at this point that except for one very wealthy family who runs a shop of the kind run by Malagasy-Indians in the centre of town, the Seventh-day Adventists do not belong to either type of economic elite referred to above. They are neither involved in the lucrative export of cash-crops, nor are they part of the elite connected to political power in town. At the same time though, they are no poorer than many other people in town.

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<sup>22</sup> Rice for a family of five for one day cost about 5000 Fmg (50p). About a pound of fish cost between 5000-10,000 Fmg (50p-£1). A metre of cloth cost something between 10,000-20,000 Fmg (£1-2), a pair of imported trainers 60,000-80,000 Fmg (£6-8), while medicine from the pharmacy cost almost exactly the same as in Europe.

Opportunities as well as difficulties characteristic of life in town distinguish Maroantsetra from any other place in the district. However, I am wary of overemphasising the difference between rural and urban circumstances. The great majority of residents in town are people who do some kind of job, or a number of jobs, for cash while remaining linked to subsistence farming in the country. And although there is a bank and a disco in Maroantsetra town, only few of its residents have ever set foot in either.

### Sahameloka: People becoming rooted



Map 3. The area of Maroantsetra (in: Andrianaivoarivony 1985: 64)

If one looks at a map of the district of Maroantsetra, it is almost entirely forested. To the north and east of Antongil Bay lies the largest area of tropical rain forest left in all of Madagascar. Tiny villages are scattered throughout. Reaching northwards from Maroantsetra town, however, there is a fan-like area defined by the course of the two large rivers of the area which are lined with settlements on either side. It is in these two wide valleys stretching out into the rain forest like the fingers of a hand that the rice of the area is produced. One of these villages, where people live as rice farmers, is Sahameloka.

One can reach Sahameloka from Maroantsetra either on foot along a muddy path following the course of the Andranofotsy river (which takes four to five hours for an experienced walker) or else paddle upstream in a dug-out canoe which actually takes longer than walking. Alternatively one can pay a fare and be taken in one of the few motorised *canottes* which travel up and down the river carrying goods and passengers a couple of times a week (against the current this also takes around five hours). The river is lined with thick tropical vegetation which makes the journey from Maroantsetra to Sahameloka extremely beautiful. As one travels along, one sees the densely forested hills in the background beyond the valley and occasionally one gets a view into the valley with its bright green rice fields. All along the way one passes people washing clothes or dishes in the river, men taking cattle across it and children having a nice, cool swim in the heat of the day.

The village of Sahameloka does not lie on the shore of the big river itself, unlike most other villages in the Andranofotsy valley, but on a much smaller river called Sahameloka – ‘the meander valley’ reflecting its winding course – which gives the village its name. Like other settlements in the area, the village of Sahameloka is surrounded by hundreds of small and large rice fields covering all the space between the village itself and the forest. Most of people’s time is taken up by work in the rice fields producing the major source of their subsistence. Also on an almost daily basis, people walk across the valley to their piece of forest in order to harvest or check on their crops. Most of these – leaves, bananas, manioc, avocado and oranges according to the season – are for consumption. But people in Sahameloka also have some cash crops, mainly cloves, and a little vanilla and coffee. The amount of money they make by selling their

cash crops can vary dramatically depending on the clove price on the world market and other aspects. At one point during the two years I lived in the area, the price for a kilo of cloves rose to five times its normal value. The whole district suddenly seemed to flourish and lots of people made lots of money and immediately spent it on tape recorders and similar purchases. Soon after this boom, however, a devastating cyclone hit the area destroying most of its clove trees. And so, as rapidly as many people – not just the economic elite – had made a fortune compared to the kind of money they normally dispose of, the future was destroyed overnight. These events also affected the life of town dwellers. But people living in villages such as Sahameloka were much more vulnerable, because their cash income depends entirely on agriculture.

I think it is important not to exaggerate the differences between living in Maroantsetra town as opposed to a village like Sahameloka. The housing conditions for instance are essentially the same for most people. In the villages as well as in town, the majority of households share a very small space among many people which is continually converted from bedroom to living room to working space, as need be. In Sahameloka, only the village president had electricity – or, rather, a single light bulb – which was powered by way of a generator behind his house. But in Maroantsetra as well, only a small minority of houses in, or close to, the centre of town were supplied with electricity.

However, rural and urban circumstances do make a significant difference to people's daily lives in a number of ways. On the one hand, as mentioned above, cash income is much more insecure for the inhabitants of Sahameloka than it is for people in Maroantsetra. Not only is cash income insecure, but it is limited to one short agricultural period of the year, namely the time of the clove harvest which lasts no longer than two months. Thus it is often difficult for people in Sahameloka to pay for things they might suddenly be in need of at any time of the year, such as medicine from the pharmacy. On the other hand, they are more or less independent of cash and other people's products. Not only do they produce almost all of their food themselves, but also items such as ropes, baskets and mats. Some cash, however, is needed to buy daily necessities like soap, kerosene, sugar, a little cooking oil perhaps, matches and the occasional notebook for school. These things are sold in the village in a couple of tiny shops, called

*boutiques*. The shortage of cash of course also means that people in Sahameloka on the whole have fewer material goods such as clothes and shoes than people living in town.

But perhaps more importantly, living in Maroantsetra or living in Sahameloka makes a noticeable difference to people's diet, not so much in terms of quantity – of which, under normal circumstances, both town and village dwellers have plenty – but in terms of quality and variety. Only very few crops actually grow in the area due to its wet climate, and imported food is neither available in Sahameloka, nor would people have the money to buy it if it was. The few cattle people own are kept for ploughing the rice fields and are slaughtered for ritual occasions only. And for reasons I never fully understood, people in Sahameloka hardly fish and do not have many chickens. People in this area of Madagascar do not keep pigs either. Thus the diet in Sahameloka consists almost entirely of large amounts of rice, leaf broth (leaves boiled in salt water), and ripe and raw bananas in many different forms, while people in Maroantsetra often eat fish, shrimps or meat and fruit, although not necessarily daily. The lack of facilities such as a hospital, a pharmacy or a post-office also has obvious impacts on life in Sahameloka.

There are many reasons which bring people from Sahameloka to Maroantsetra, sometimes just for an afternoon despite the long distance, but mostly for a day or two as work at home allows. Most people who live in the district of Maroantsetra have never been outside it. The likelihood of a town-dweller having been to other places in Madagascar is, however, certainly greater than it would be for a person from Sahameloka. There, contact with the outside world beyond Maroantsetra is largely limited to men going on an errand to trade cattle in a place called Mandritsara, a couple of hundred miles to the southwest, or young men walking the other direction through the forest to Antalaha on the east coast (a two-day walk one way) in order to buy new clothes for New Year if, that is, the clove harvest has brought in enough cash.

Sahameloka is situated on a little hill and is thus slightly raised above the level of the valley which saved it from being flooded in the cyclone mentioned above. Its overall population is about 1000 inhabitants, half of whom are below the age of fifteen. As in every other village of the area and much of Maroantsetra town, most houses are built from different parts of the local palm tree with floors of split bamboo. Some are more solid structures of hard wood and are covered with rusty corrugated-iron roof sheets.

Given the wet weather conditions throughout the year, the reddish soil and the paths criss-crossing the village are muddy and slippery most days (in town, the sand absorbs most of the water). It takes a bit of practice to go down to the Sahameloka river at the foot of the village in order to fetch water or to wash without slipping, which, of course, I rather often did to the amusement of the local children.

Sahameloka is divided into two main parts, called 'At the foot of the *varôtro* tree' (Ambodivarôtro) and 'The new settlement' (Antanambao). But this distinction results from the settlement history and is not physically visible today. The village is made up of seven ancestries<sup>23</sup>. Each of these, with the exception of one, occupies a particular area of the village. Three parallel streets cut through the village and partly define the borders of the different neighbourhoods within it. Within the compound of a particular ancestry, its members basically live and work as nuclear families. But neighbouring kin are in daily contact and often support each other in little ways such as helping to pound rice or snap cloves. Moreover, kin often join up to perform work which is better done in big groups, for example collecting palm leaves in the forest for house building.

Some of the younger couples who have founded new households in the last few years had to move away from the traditional locality of their ancestry within the village due to lack of space to build new houses there. They now live in a newly settled area on the outskirts of the village called 'The second new settlement' (Antanambao faharoa) where members of the village's different ancestries mix, but where, at the same time, a similar kind of ancestry-based settlement pattern is developing as we find in the village as a whole.

Every ancestry has its own burial ground not far from the village where its members are buried and later exhumed and finally, wrapped in several layers of cloth and sometimes clothes, put to rest in mostly individual sarcophagi (*hazovato*). Ultimately, as is the case with other Betsimisaraka on Madagascar's east coast, a person belongs to his or her patrilineal ancestry. Although kinship and rules of exogamy are

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<sup>23</sup> To be correct, an eighth one has recently been founded by a man who split from his ancestry because of a disagreement over family property. This newly created ancestry, however, only consists of a handful of people who live around one small yard.



reckoned cognatically<sup>24</sup>, the “father’s side is really strong” (*tena mahery ny ilan’ ny ray*<sup>25</sup>). And it is with them that one’s bones are laid to rest after exhumation.

In fact, the history of the village’s burial grounds is a little more complicated than I have indicated and illustrates nicely how, in the course of the past century, people have gone through a “process of implantation” (Cole 2001: 155) and have ‘finally’ become rooted in Sahameloka. Let us therefore now look at the village’s history. I will pay particular attention to the issue of slave descent, because it is relevant to some of the theoretical issues raised in this thesis.

### The history of Sahameloka and the issue of slave descent

Local oral history offers two versions of the foundation of the village. According to one version consistently told by people belonging to an ancestry that descends from a Zafindrabay slave (and other people as well), the village was founded by their ‘great ancestor’ (*razam-be*) and founder of their lineage. According to the other version told me by the oldest man of the village who is a Zafindrabay descendant (he was born in 1917), it was his father’s older brother who founded Sahameloka.

I am inclined to accept the first version partly because it was offered to me very consistently by many different people, partly because the ancestry that descends from the Zafindrabay live in the part of the village called ‘The *new* settlement’ which would suggest that indeed they were not the first permanent inhabitants. But then: why is this ancestry called ‘The people from Sahameloka’ (Antisahameloka), and why are they generally acknowledged as the ‘masters of the land’ (*tompontany*)? What seems to me the most likely course of events is that before French colonisation, the Zafindrabay had a temporary settlement where, or close to where, Sahameloka is now located. And they probably went there sporadically, bringing some of their slaves along, in order to attend to fields and forest land they owned in the vicinity<sup>26</sup>. As a permanent village, however,

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<sup>24</sup> Like other Betsimisaraka (Cole 2001: 93), people in the area of Maroantsetra say that everyone has ‘eight ancestors’ (*valo razana*), four on one’s mother’s side, four on one’s father’s.

<sup>25</sup> Cole’s informants used the expression “The father’s foot is stronger (*tongo-dray mahery*)” (Cole 2001: 71).

<sup>26</sup> According to Petit (1967: 29, 37), Sahameloka was one of the villages controlled by the Zafindrabay where they and their slaves lived together. This information, however, contradicts

Sahameloka was probably founded about one hundred years ago after the abolition of slavery.

Whatever the settlement history, the fact is that today, among other ancestries, both descendants of the Zafindrabay (the Antisahameloka ancestry) and the descendants of one of their slaves (the Besoana ancestry) live in Sahameloka, and they are moreover linked by numerous marriage ties. This is quite remarkable in comparison with the situation in certain other areas of Madagascar which I will come back to below. Concerning the other five ancestries who now live in Sahameloka, I am almost certain – on the basis of the oral history I have been able to gather while living there – that three are also of slave descent, although their ancestors were not necessarily slaves of the Zafindrabay. The great ancestor of one of these three ancestries (the Ambodimanga) is also very likely to have been an ex-slave of the Zafindrabay. Another ancestry (the Môrafeno) appears to descend from slaves captured in the Comoro islands. And another one (the Nandrasana) certainly descends from slaves, but it is unclear whose slaves their ancestors were (their history is likely to be linked to the trade with the Mascarenes). One of the ancestries of Sahameloka (the Maroantseva) was founded relatively recently and results from a mixed marriage between a male descendant of the Zafindrabay and a female descendant of their slaves. And number seven (the Antaimoro) is a recent immigrant group from the south of Madagascar (Farafangana). According to oral history, this ancestry arrived in Sahameloka only some 25 years ago “in search of money” (*nandeha nitady vôla*). In sum: out of the seven local ancestries, four are of slave descent, two are not, and one is of mixed slave-free origin which means that the majority of the inhabitants of Sahameloka are of slave descent. When exactly the founders of their ancestries arrived and settled in the village is difficult to establish. But it seems that apart from the most recent immigrant group, the ancestors of the people of Sahameloka settled in the village in the course of the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after slavery had been abolished in Madagascar.

People's origins are significant, but what is perhaps even more significant is the fact that the inhabitants of Sahameloka share a history of uprootedness, and of this they are clearly aware. Except for the descendants of the Zafindrabay (the Antisahameloka)

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the oral history I have been able to gather in the village itself. Unfortunately, Petit does not tell

who are generally acknowledged as the ‘masters of the land’ in the region, all ancestries have come from elsewhere. “We are all migrants” (*mpivahiny izahay sintry jiaby*) people often said and indeed, this was the first piece of information about Sahameloka and its inhabitants I was offered by numerous people soon after my arrival in the village. Everyone knows that their ancestors left where they originally came from in order to “look for land to cultivate” (*nandeha nitady tany malalaka*<sup>27</sup>), but *where* they came from and what *exactly* drove them into migration, most people did not seem to know. They simply know that, although Sahameloka has become their home (*tanindrazana*), their ‘true’ ancestral land (*tanindrazana*) lies elsewhere and that their ancestors left it in search to make a living for themselves and their descendants.

Migration in search of land does not by itself imply slave descent. Many poor free people all over Madagascar have for a long time been forced into migration as well, and indeed, internal migration is an extremely common phenomenon all across the island (see Deschamps 1959). The people from Madagascar’s southeast, among them the Antaimoro, are a case in point (Deschamps 1959: 25-53). And as we saw, one of Sahameloka’s present ancestries originates from just that region several hundred miles to the south of Maroantsetra. Although the Antaimoro of the village know exactly where their ancestors migrated from, they have lost all contact with their place of origin. And they have stopped practising Antaimoro customs, have adopted Betsimisaraka mortuary practices and now consider Sahameloka their *tanindrazana* (home/land of the ancestors).

The crucial difference, however, between migrants in general and people of slave descent is that the latter are aware of the shallowness of their ancestral history, while the descendants of the former view a long line of ancestors which goes back much further than anybody can actually remember. In contrast, even the best informed members of those ancestries in Sahameloka who are of slave descent cannot trace their history further back than three or four generations. And they know that it stops there and that the time before is a black box. The comparatively small size of their burial grounds testifies to the lack of historical depths of their lineages.

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us how he obtained the information he provides.

<sup>27</sup> On the expression *mitady* (present form of *nitady*) in talk of migration see Feeley-Harnik 1991: 243.

I mentioned earlier in this chapter that Zafindrabay slaves were buried alongside their owners, because the number of slaves was held to demonstrate the power of particular Zafindrabay clans (Petit 1967: 33). This fact is highly significant, because it means that the slaves were deprived of communicating with their dead kin through mortuary rituals, and hence they were deprived of the blessing of their own ancestors. Ancestral blessing, however, is what *makes* people into kin (rather than simply being born as kin) and into socially meaningful persons in Madagascar (Bloch 1985, Southall 1986). People deprived of ancestral blessing are like branches cut off a tree, without roots, without history (Feeley-Harnik 1982: 37, 1991: 57-58, Bloch 1994b, Graeber 1997: 374, Cole 1998: 622, Evers 2001: 30-37). In the case of the ancestry from Sahameloka that descends from slaves captured in the Comores – one of their members said he had once seen a ‘document’ containing this information – the disruption of history is even more obvious. And so it is for the old man (Maman’ i Claude’s father) who gave me this account of where his ancestry, the Nandrasana came from:

“In the old days, there were people who stole children, they stole them and then sold them to people elsewhere. According to what I have heard, our great ancestors were stolen by people, and they were sold there [in Nandrasana, a village along the western littoral of Antongil Bay from where his father’s generation, now as freed slaves, later moved to the area of Sahameloka]. That’s how it came about that they lived there [in Nandrasana], and then they stayed and had children and made a living there, they got used to being there. But I don’t know where they came from originally. From far away. (...) They were sold in Nandrasana, people from there bought them.”<sup>28</sup>

The fact that the slaves were cut off from their ancestors meant that once they were freed, they had to start their history from scratch.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ôlo talôha mangalatra zaza, zaza angalariñy eto ambidy amin’ôlo any. Fandrinesako azy nangalariñ’ ôlo i razam-benay akao io, nambidin’ ôlo akao. Izy tônga teo dia teo fô, tômbo teo, namelon-teña teo izy, tamaña teo izy. Fô tany niavian’ izy io any tsy haiky eky ay! Avy lavitry (...) Ambidy any Nandrasana, ôlo tao no nividy azy.*

Being aware of the extreme sensitivity of the issue of slavery in all of Madagascar, I was taken by surprise at how openly some people in Sahameloka spoke to me about their own slave descent. I set foot in Sahameloka for the very first time on 12<sup>th</sup> December. Four days later, I visited Papan' i Fredel and his family, members of the Seventh-day Adventist church I was eager to get to know. I asked Papan' i Fredel an innocent question regarding his family background. To my surprise, he told me straight out that both his matrilineal and his patrilineal kin had been slaves (using the word *andevo* [slave] which in many parts of Madagascar is, if at all uttered, then only as a whisper) and that they were therefore “a lost kind” (*very karazana izahay*)<sup>29</sup>. Papan' i Fredel was to become a close friend and important informant for me, but at this point, he hardly knew me.

But people like Papan' i Fredel or the old man whom I quoted above were exceptions. They were exceptions in regard to their actual knowledge of the history of their ancestries, and they were exceptional in how openly they talked about slave descent, sometimes explicitly, sometimes less so. In fact, in the course of my time in Sahameloka, I became increasingly uncertain as to whether people who I knew were of slave descent – thanks to Papan' i Fredel and a few others who made no secret of it – were actually *aware* of this part of their history. If it was socially possible for Papan' i Fredel to tell me that he belonged to a “lost kind” the first time we had a proper conversation, why would it not be possible for others to do the same, even if perhaps more implicitly? But most people did not, even as I got to know them well. What they did tell me often, however, was that their ancestors had migrated to Sahameloka from elsewhere in search of a living (*nandeha nitady*, *nandeha nitady tany malalaka*, *nandeha nitady vôla*), and that that was all they knew. Young people sent me to ask the old people, and many older people sent me to ask the ‘village historians’ (Papan' i Fredel was one of them). I remained uncertain till the end of my fieldwork, and I still am, about the degree of people’s awareness of their slave descent. The following illustrates the ambiguity of the data.

One day, two months into living with my host family in Sahameloka, I stayed at home while everyone else was out working in the fields. As was often the case, the

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<sup>29</sup> See Feeley-Harnik 1982: 37 on the expression *very* as referring to slavery.

father of Maman' i Claude of my host family, who lives in a village an hour's walk away, passed by. Since I was the only person at home and he seemed to be in a talkative mood, we had a long conversation about 'the old times' and his family's history. He was more than happy for me to tape our conversation. When I asked him to tell me what he knew about his *razam-be*, his family's great ancestors, he gave me the account I quoted above explaining frankly how they had been stolen and sold.

Not only was I surprised at how explicitly he spoke of his slave descent which after all was a rare thing for people to do, but I was also surprised at his request to bring the tape of our conversation with me next time I came to his village. This was because, as he said, he wanted all his family to hear what he had to say about 'the old times'. He repeated his request several times before he left. A couple of weeks later, I and Maman' i Claude set off to see her family in her natal village. 'Have you brought the tape?', her father inquired as soon as we had arrived. I had and so the whole family – that is Maman' i Claude's father, herself, her stepmother, and all of her three siblings with their spouses and several children – gathered in the evening to listen to it. I was very anxious to observe people's reactions to the passage concerning their slave descent. Nobody batted an eyelid. Neither could I detect any signs of surprise or uneasiness, nor did anybody say anything about it after the tape had ended. Obviously, Maman' i Claude's father's eagerness to have his descendants listen to the tape, as well as their silence, could be interpreted in many ways which I cannot explore here. Suffice it to note that it was impossible to tell whether the information that their ancestors had been slaves was news to them or not. Whatever the answer, I am quite certain that one's slave descent is not something people talk about among themselves. Using the tape recording was perhaps the only way Maman' i Claude's father could tell his descendants this part of their history. However, the incident also illustrates that the issue of slave descent is not as difficult to address as it is in other parts of Madagascar, a point to which I will return shortly.

People's awareness of their slave descent remains unclear. This of course does not necessarily mean that being of slave descent has no social or other consequences. What is clear, however, is that the inhabitants of Sahameloka (with the exception of the descendants of the Zafindrabay) are perfectly aware that they all share a history of

uprootedness, and they often volunteer this information. Yet time has passed and many generations have come and gone since the ancestors left from wherever they came from and settled in Sahameloka (or, in the case of most local women, in a village nearby). And the people of Sahameloka have in the course of the past generations managed to root themselves where they now live, and they have come to regard Sahameloka as their *tanindrazana* (land of the ancestors / home).

The finalisation of this process of becoming rooted in the new land perhaps took place a few years before my fieldwork. Up to then, the sarcophagi containing the bones of the ancestors of the people of Sahameloka had been located in one of the two old Zafindrabay burial grounds some twenty kilometres down the river (a massive area near Andranofotsy stretching for several miles). In 1992 or thereabouts, however, the ancestors were carried to Sahameloka and all ancestries founded their own burial grounds (*fasana*) on the outskirts of what is now their *tanindrazana*. “They have all come upstream” (*efa noriky sintry*)<sup>30</sup>.

A hundred years after the abolition of slavery in Madagascar, the social consequences of being of slave descent have not disappeared (see Bloch 1994b, Rasolofomanantsoa 1997, Graeber 1997, Rabearimanana 2000, Evers 1999, 2001). But being of slave descent does not matter *to the same extent* everywhere in Madagascar. While among the Merina and the Betsileo of the Malagasy highlands, descendants of slaves often continue to be socially stigmatized and economically dependent on the descendants of their owners to this day, this is not necessarily the case for other Malagasy groups (see Bloch 1979, 1980), nor is it true in the area where I did fieldwork as among other Betsimisaraka populations (Cole 2001: 73). Among the southern Betsileo, described in detail by Evers (1999, 2001), descendants of slaves are stigmatized to this day as “dirty/impure people” (*olona maloto*, Evers 2001: 30-37), and they do not belong to any named descent group. Moreover, their slave descent is literally visible in terms of their housing situation, their appearance and behaviour, and the ritual practices they do or do not engage in. These people are painfully reminded of their non-

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<sup>30</sup> The only exception are the Nandrasana who to this day bring their exhumed ancestors back to Nandrasana. At the time of my fieldwork, they were negotiating the movement of at least some of their ancestors to Sahameloka (and another village where some of them live) with their kin in

status every day and thus cannot possibly be unaware of their slave descent<sup>31</sup>. Such a situation is, however, quite unthinkable in the Maroantsetra region. In Sahameloka for example, slave descent is ‘invisible’ today. Descendants of free people and descendants of slaves do the same kind of work (except that some descendants of slaves work partly as sharecroppers, but they do not work for people in the village, and my data does not confirm Petit’s observation concerning the 1960s, that sharecroppers live like a “prolétariat miséreux” [1967: 37]). They live in the same kind of houses and have similar things inside them. In fact, all three families in Sahameloka who are said to be rich belong to ancestries of slave descent. People of slave descent belong to named ancestries and have their own tombs where they go to ask for the blessing of their ancestors. And they do not differ from descendants of the Zafindrabay or other free people in regard to ritual practices such as exhumation or cattle sacrifice<sup>32</sup>.

Bloch, following Watson’s terminology (1980), has suggested that in Madagascar we find both open systems of slavery typical of African societies (see Kopytoff and Miers 1977), and closed systems typically found in Asia (Bloch 1980, also Bloch 1971, 1979). While within an open system slaves may become incorporated into the free population, a closed system denies them such integration. There are two crucial aspects which largely account for the difference between the closed pattern, found among the Betsileo for example, and the open pattern found in Sahameloka: namely marriage rules and access to land. While among the Betsileo marriages between descendants of slaves and descendants of free people are to this day highly stigmatised and, in the rare cases they occur, extremely difficult for the people concerned (Kottak 1980: 103-105, Evers 2001: 38-50, Freeman 2001: 27-29, 128-129; also see Bloch 1994a [1971]: 199 regarding the Merina), people of free and of slave descent in Sahameloka have intermarried for generations. As a consequence, the boundaries between them have

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Nandrasana. But they were as clear as other people whose ancestors have already ‘come upstream’ that Sahameloka is now their *tanindrazana* where they belong.

<sup>31</sup> Freeman’s ethnography of the northern Betsileo confirms this overall situation of descendants of slaves (2001: 117, 128-130, 143, 159-161).

<sup>32</sup> It is interesting to note that, already in the 1930s, Zafindrabay sarcophagi and those of ‘ordinary’ ancestries looked exactly the same (compare Pont 1930 and Decary 1939).



become blurred<sup>33</sup>. The Betsileo slave descendants in contrast remain outside society, and because of this, they have no access to land. This is not at all the case in Sahameloka, where, although the descendants of slaves may often have worse land or not as much as people of free descent in the area, they nevertheless own some land. In Madagascar, land not only gives people economic freedom and security, but without it, there is no *tanindrazana*, that is, no home, no soil to cultivate, and no ground to bury one's dead or build a tomb on, and thus no ancestral blessing which is so vitally important for social reproduction. It is precisely the fact that among the Betsileo the descendants of slaves are denied access to land – which means they are deprived of both economic and social resources – that keeps them in a position of quasi-slavery. The descendants of slaves in the region of Maroantsetra, in contrast, have been able to root their ancestors and themselves in new soil.

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<sup>33</sup> The contemporary relevance of slave descent may be perceived differently in villages where, in contrast to Sahameloka, the great majority of people are descendants of slave owners, in particular in Andranofotsy.

### Chapter 3

#### Profiles: Diversity and Commonalities

In this chapter, I want to portray the people who are the subjects of this study. Obviously, I cannot present every single one of my informants, but include some and exclude others in the pages that follow. Although the people who appear in this chapter are but a few of a much larger number of Seventh-day Adventists in the district of Maroantsetra, they represent a spectrum of various ‘types’ of church members. I will attempt to do justice to the *diversity* of my informants’ situation and background, as well as their personalities, whilst trying not to lose sight of possible commonalities besides being members of the Seventh-day Adventist church. I will begin with impressionistic portraits of my host families in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka as well as of some of my other informants in town and in the village. The point of these brief portraits is to give the reader an idea of the kinds of people I am writing about in this thesis rather than to present them in any systematic kind of way.

#### Impressionistic portraits of selected informants

The members of my host family in town lead a life typical of town dwellers. Papan’ i Beby, a man in his early fifties, is a civil servant. He comes from a poor family, but he nevertheless managed to train as a hydraulic technician at a college in the capital of Madagascar. He has been working for the local *Service du Génie Rural* (Rural Engineering) for a very long time and receives a regular, if rather low, salary. His main job is to make maps of different parts of the district, and so he spends a considerable amount of time – weeks and, more rarely, months at a time – somewhere in the countryside conducting the necessary surveys. Maman’ i Beby is responsible for the daily shopping at the market, the household and related activities. They have three children. The oldest, a daughter, moved away from Maroantsetra many years before I lived with the family for sensitive reasons not directly spoken about, and contact between her and her parents has been minimal ever since. The other two children, an eighteen-year old boy called Kiki and a fifteen-year old girl called Beby, still lived with

their parents at the time of my fieldwork. Both went to a Catholic school. They spent their free time with Adventist and non-Adventist friends alike.

In the course of the many years Papan' i Beby has worked for the Malagasy government, he has been transferred to several towns in Madagascar. In 1982 he was called to work in Maroantsetra where his specialisation as a hydraulic engineer is in great demand (Maroantsetra is an important rice-cultivating area). The family has lived in Maroantsetra ever since. However, they are not local people, but originate from further south along the east coast (Brickaville, south of Toamasina). Despite their long residence in Maroantsetra, to this day they feel strangers there; they feel uprooted and torn away from where they belong, a fact they often lament. Despite repeated requests on Papan' i Beby's part, up to now he has not been allocated to work in his home region.

The family is not well off, partly because neither Papan' i Beby nor Maman' i Beby have any kin or land in the district of Maroantsetra and therefore they have to pay rent and to buy their daily rice. They live in a small house whose roof leaks in numerous places, so that whenever it rains, buckets are quickly distributed around the house. The formal education of Kiki and Beby is the priority in the budget of their parents and they sacrifice a large percentage of their money to this end.

The most shining character in the family, it seems to me, is Papan' i Beby. He is extraordinarily educated although very largely self-taught. He loves to read and study and always has done, he says. Papan' i Beby is like a dry sponge absorbing any knowledge he comes across. He is an intellectual man who enjoys discussing issues of all kinds. Many times he impressed me with his tremendous knowledge of world history, geography and scientific inventions, far surpassing my own, not to mention his Biblical expertise and his fluency in French. I was amazed, for example, to hear him explain the meaning of the expression *pachyderm*, or the fact that it was the Roman Emperor Vespasian who first introduced public toilets and that therefore male public toilets are called *vespasienne* in France. On one occasion his daughter Beby asked him what a *mausolée* was. Without hesitation he explained that there used to be, in antiquity, a ruler called Mausol who had himself built a tomb in the style of what came to be known as a *mausolée*. He continued that this was one of the Seven Wonders of the World which of course he can list with ease. Looking back on his days at school, Papan' i Beby recalls having studied by the cooking fire for lack of paraffin and having been in possession of

just one pair of trousers and a single shirt until his teacher, noticing his poverty, gave him a second shirt as a present.

Maman' i Beby seems to suffer more than her husband from being away from home. She often speaks with great affection of her *grandmère* who brought her up, because her mother was only a teenager when she was born. And despite the fact that *grandmère* has been a spirit medium all her life, and thinks of church-goers in general as hypocrites, Maman' i Beby has real hopes that she might go to Heaven, because she is such a kind and good person. Maman' i Beby also has a great-grandmother of Arab origin from Madagascar's southeast, a fact which she often mentions rather proudly pointing to her facial features which bear that heritage. Maman' i Beby is liked by many people in town, and she has numerous connections to many non-Adventist inhabitants. She has especially good relations with a Malagasy-Indian family who run a shop in the town centre, as well as with the owner of the local pharmacy. In her free time, Maman' i Beby does beautiful embroidery decorating sheets and pillow cases with *sujets Malagasy* – people planting rice, riding in a canoe, carrying babies on their backs – to support Papan' i Beby's income.

Papan' i Beby and his family joined the Seventh-day Adventist church shortly after they arrived in Maroantsetra in 1982. Kiki and Beby grew up with Adventism. When I first met them in 1987, and still at the time of my fieldwork a decade later, they were all very committed church members. All family members had specific duties within the local church, and Papan' i Beby had been a lay leader of the local Adventist church for many years. When I lived with them, he was one of the key persons of the local congregation whom many members approached for advice and guidance. When Maman' and Papan' i Beby walk to church on a Sabbath morning, dressed in smart clothes and polished shoes, one would never think that they had just walked out of a house which is so slanted that the family jokingly calls it 'our Boing'.

My host family in Sahameloka are, like everyone else in this village surrounded by the Malagasy rain forest, rice farmers who spend almost all of their time caring for their crops. There is Papan' i Claude (Claude's dad), Maman' i Claude (Claude's mum), Claude, their first child aged twenty, Mazava, his younger sister of about fourteen, and

two considerably younger boys (Mezaquei aged nine and Ezekela of about four). Two further children have died.

Papan' i Claude has lived in Sahameloka all his life, while Maman' i Claude comes from a village an hour's walk away. Their main ambition and desire is to provide their children with enough land for them to make a living in the future together with their partners. They are both small and thin, but fit to work long hours in the rice fields and the forest if necessary.

Both Maman' i Claude and Papan' i Claude went to local primary schools for a couple of years, but neither of them is fluent in reading or writing. In fact, Papan' i Claude is practically illiterate. At the same time, he knows a lot about the history of his own ancestry and that of others in the village and is considered one of the experts of village history. Maman' i Claude can manage to read a fairly long text, though slowly and not without stumbling over a word or an expression here and there. While Claude completed primary school in Sahameloka and even began secondary school in Maroantsetra after that, his younger sister is hardly able to read, let alone write. And Mezaquei, the nine-year old boy, finds every possible (often invented) reason to skip school; he has repeated the first class five times already and still cannot read or write any word other than his name. In contrast to my host family in town, the members of my host family in Sahameloka only have the vaguest of ideas about the outside world; they were immensely impressed both with my literacy and my technical equipment (a simple camera and a tape recorder).

Maman' i Claude and Papan' i Claude were not only the very first members of the Adventist church in Sahameloka, but Papan' i Claude was at the time of my fieldwork the oldest of all the baptised members in the village (he was 47). Thus he was respected as the most senior elder (*ray aman-dreny*) within the congregation. However, neither he nor his wife can play a leading role in the local church because of their lack of literacy and Biblical expertise. Nevertheless, they are very committed church members. Papan' i Claude is a rather shy and very calm man who never seems to get upset about anything. He does not speak much either, and he is much less vocal about being an Adventist than his wife or son Claude. However, vis-à-vis his non-Adventist kin, he is one of the most uncompromising people I have met, willing to accept serious trouble rather than giving in to family pressure (see chapter 6), much more so than many other

people who despite being much 'louder' about their being Adventists, are more willing to compromise for the sake of family relations.

Maman' and Papan' i Silivie are a young couple with two daughters, aged six and one. While he was born and raised in Sahameloka, Maman' i Silivie comes from a village further downstream. They are rice farmers and relatively well off, partly as a result of Papan' i Silivie not having many siblings (they are four children in total) and the land they inherited from their parents not having been split between too many parties. Both have a few years of primary school, but despite knowing that he was born in 1966, figuring out his age proved a difficult task for Papan' i Silivie. 'I may be roughly 30 or so', as he finally gave up on his mental calculations.

Both Maman' and Papan' i Silivie are enthusiastic members of the Adventist church in Sahameloka, and they both have a number of duties within it. They were amongst the first people of the village to join in 1993 and both got baptised a year later proof of which are their baptismal certificates proudly displayed on the wall of the room in which they live. In particular Papan' i Silivie is a very vocal member of the congregation. He is always amongst the first to detect laxness of its members in religious matters, and to remind them of the necessity to study the Bible every single day, and to trust in God even in times of hardship such as was the case after the cyclone of April 2000 when the general morale of the village's Adventists fell low. Papan' i Silivie's reading skills are very good and he often chairs adult Bible discussions in church, while his wife is outdoors with the young children teaching them a new song.

Christa is a seventeen-year old boy from Sahameloka who at the time of my fieldwork lived in Maroantsetra together with one of his younger brothers in order to attend school there. When I met him, he had been interested in Adventism for about two months. He was very enthusiastic indeed, and about to get baptised urging me to take his picture on that occasion. Christa's parents in Sahameloka were extremely hostile to his joining the church and threatened to disinherit him and not allow him on their premises anymore. Christa, however, remained firm announcing that he was going to be an Adventist regardless of what his family would say, and he stopped attending exhumations. As a result, his parents stopped paying his school fees and so he was

forced to move back to Sahameloka. Two months after his baptism, he had left the church and never even bothered to pick up the pictures of his baptism that he'd been so keen to have taken. Everyone in the village agreed that he simply could not take the pressure from his family.

Christa is an example of someone who has been intensely involved with the Adventist church, but only briefly. I met several converts like him. He is also an example of someone torn between different loyalties, again a common problem of members of the Seventh-day Adventist church, probably throughout Madagascar and elsewhere. This was brought home to me when after I had arrived in Sahameloka, he appeared in church on one of the first Saturdays I was there. Sitting right at the back and having the nails of his little fingers painted pink – a contemporary fashion among men in Maroantsetra, but frowned upon by the Adventists who are not in favour of any kind of make-up – and not uttering a word during the entire morning, I am sure he tried to give me the impression that he was still with the Adventists which he claimed he was. But he only came that one time and then never again. After all, this was the village of his parents on whom he was dependent at his young age and who disapproved so strongly of his involvement in the church.

Maman-dRazaka (Razaka's mum) and Papan-dRazaka (Razaka's dad<sup>1</sup>) are among the oldest members of the Adventist congregation in Maroantsetra town. They joined the church in 1968 as one of the very first in the district and have been with the church ever since. Three of their six children are Seventh-day Adventists as well. Neither Razaka's father nor his mother originate from the area, but from other towns along the east coast (he is from Fénérive-Est to the south, she is from Antalaha to the north of Maroantsetra). While Maman-dRazaka was brought to Maroantsetra as a child to be looked after by her grandmother, Papan-dRazaka's father came as a young man in search of land to cultivate. He is said to be of slave descent. Today, they have their own rice fields, but they also work as sharecroppers on other people's property. They are very poor people.

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<sup>1</sup> If a name begins with R, the 'i' (as in Maman' i Beby) is replaced by -d.

While Maman-dRazaka regularly attends church service on the Sabbath, together with her children and in-laws, Papan-dRazaka only turns up occasionally and only when there is no work to be done in the fields, and when he does come to church, he seems to be asleep most of the time (he is also hard of hearing). Moreover, as he told me himself, he holds the ritual office of ‘the guardian of the tomb’ (*mpiambinjiny*<sup>2</sup>) of his ancestry<sup>3</sup>. This office necessitates his participation in exhumations and sacrifices which is entirely against Adventist principles. Maman- and Papan-dRazaka are of course aware of this but, as Christa, they are torn between different loyalties – towards the church, their families as well as towards the wider community within which they are respected elders (*ôlo maventy*). They would ‘feel ashamed’ (*henamaso*), they explained to me, if Papan-dRazaka withdrew from his ritual office or if they stopped attending exhumations. But, they added, they prefer not to tell the whole (Adventist) world about it (although everyone in church knows anyway).

Maman’ i Omino lives with three of her four children, between the ages of six and seventeen, in a tiny place in Maroantsetra which is just about big enough, but only just, to accommodate them all and their few belongings. She also has a twenty-four-year old daughter (from a brief relationship with a French man) who lives in Madagascar’s capital, but whom Maman’ i Omino prefers to keep quiet about. Throughout my fieldwork, her husband, a teacher, was away on further training in Madagascar’s capital and only came to visit once a year. Maman’ i Omino became, together with her husband, a Seventh-day Adventist in 1983.

Despite being local people, neither she nor her husband have their own rice fields for reasons I was never told. And so Maman’ i Omino has found numerous ways of making a living for herself and her children as best she can. At one point, she told me, she used to make hats which she sold at the local market. Six years prior to my

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<sup>2</sup> While *miambiny* means ‘to guard’, local people were unable to offer an explanation as to the meaning of *jiny*, but guessed that it might be another word for tomb. However, Cole mentions (2001: 144) that her southern Betsimisaraka informants sometimes used the word *jiny* to refer to something like one’s soul or spirit. It is possible that the term *mpiambinjiny* refers to this meaning.

<sup>3</sup> Since his paternal ancestry originates from elsewhere, the tomb is located within the ‘burial ground of immigrants/guests’ (*ny fasam-bahiny*) in Maroantsetra from where many ancestors’ bones are brought back to their place of origin (*tanindrazana*) after exhumation.



fieldwork, she had taken up selling books on behalf of the Seventh-day Adventist church, a job several of the local church members have (see chapter 11). But she neither possessed nor had she read any of the books she sold; they were both beyond her financial means and her reading abilities. At the same time, she worked on other people's rice fields helping out here and there.

Maman' i Omino is a well-known walker. Once she decided to go and visit her husband in Antananarivo hundreds of kilometres away. Because she could not afford the entire fare in a *taxi-brousse*, let alone an airplane, she walked some 200 km either way in order to cut down on her expenses. From her trip to the capital, she brought with her a big bag full of second hand clothes which she then sold at the market in Maroantsetra town.

Although, as she told me, she had landed with the Seventh-day Adventist church more by chance than by desire and was intrigued at first only by the choir, she was a member committed more strongly to the Adventist world view and life style than many others at the time I knew her.

Dadin' i Miri – Miri's grandmother – as I came to know her, is from the offshore island of St. Marie south of Maroantsetra from where she and her husband left some forty years ago in search of land and work. Dadin' i Miri never went to school and is completely illiterate. She has given birth to eighteen children of whom eleven are still alive. Her husband left her seven years ago for another woman and she now lives with three of her children and five of her grandchildren in a sizeable house in Maroantsetra. They are rice farmers and despite her age, Dadin' i Miri still spends a lot of time working in the fields.

Dadin' i Miri was a spirit medium for over forty years until, at the age of sixty-five or so, she joined the Adventist church during the time I did fieldwork in Maroantsetra. Never before had she belonged to any church. As she explicitly stated, she joined the Seventh-day Adventist church because of her disappointment with being a spirit medium. What had she gained in all these years? Her marriage had broken up and she was still poor, but the spirits who possessed her nevertheless kept demanding more and more costly things. She had long resisted the many attempts to convince her to join the Adventist church on the part of her eldest son and her youngest daughter who lives

with her, both of whom have been Adventists for many years. But then suddenly – anticipating the year 2000 – she changed her mind. She got baptised only a few months after having held her last spirit possession *séance*. She expressed the pragmatism of her decision thus:

“I will join and see what happens; if things remain the same as before, I will just sit there and do nothing [neither serve the spirits nor go to church]. But if I see that things change for me, then I will stay with the church.”<sup>4</sup>

The Fredels, as I like to call them, are a family of ten. Papan' i Fredel we have already met. He was the one who spoke very openly about his slave descent. Maman' and Papan' i Fredel, both born and raised in Sahameloka, are proud of the fact that neither of them has any children other than the eight they have together, all of whom sons except for little eight-year old Raclinette, the last one adored and spoilt by everyone. Before they became members of the Seventh-day Adventist church in 1995, they used to be extremely poor even by Sahameloka standards, partly because they have very little land of their own, and partly because Papan' i Fredel wasted the little money they had on drink. They used to live in misery, their children barely having any clothes to put on. These days, they seem to be doing alright for themselves which they see as the outcome of having joined the Adventist church, and of Papan' i Fredel having stopped drinking as a result. They do have some land, but by no means enough to feed their many mouths. Some time after having joined the church, they began to work as sharecroppers for a family of Zafindrabay descent who lives in another village, and both parties seem to be happy with the arrangement. They say that they were chosen as sharecroppers, because Adventists have a reputation of being trustworthy. Strolling past their house, one always finds at least a couple of the younger children pounding rice or Papan' i Fredel sitting on the veranda of the house next to theirs chatting with his (non-Adventist)

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<sup>4</sup> *Hivavaka ndreky izaho hoy izaho, ake mizaha ny fandehany; izy ka mbôla tahaka ny teo koa izy, zaho mandandaña enin' ahy, midôko fô. Fa izy ka hitako misy fiovany ny anahy, zaho manaraka ity fô.*

relatives. The latter are perfectly happy with him and his family having joined the Seventh-day Adventist church because they, too, can see the benefit.

While Maman' i Fredel's parents never went to any church (they live quite a distance away in the middle of the forest), Papan' i Fredel grew up as a Catholic, but stopped attending any services once his parents were dead. Their three eldest sons, however, joined the Protestant church as teenagers and it was they who became the first converts to Adventism in the family. Their parents and siblings followed soon after.

These portraits show a lot of diversity in terms of people's background and overall situation. Do their conversion stories perhaps reveal more commonalities? I have already hinted at some of them, but now turn to look in more detail at how the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka explain why they became members of the church.

### **Conversion stories**

I was basically given two types of conversion stories. The first type was of an instrumental nature. Maman' i Claude, for example, gave me without a moment's hesitation the following account more or less in these words when I asked her why they had become Seventh-day Adventists.

'Before we became Adventists, Claude, our eldest son, fell critically ill. Fearing that he may die, we went to consult the diviner who told us to do this and that [to take traditional medicine]. Then we also went and asked the ancestors who also told us to do this and that [probably to bring clothes to their tombs]. We did all we were told to do, but Claude still did not recover. Then we heard that the Adventist church can heal people [Maman' i Claude's brother was already an Adventist at that time]. And so on a Wednesday evening we went to the Adventist church in Sakatihina [Maman' i Claude's natal village], and before dawn came, Claude's condition started to improve. After having been ill for a month, he recovered within one day. That is why we became Adventists and have been ever since.'

Another family in the village and several other people I spoke to had similar stories to tell relating to sickness and recovery. One woman I knew in Maroantsetra who suffered from severe depression seemed to be particularly attracted to the Adventist church because she felt that church members cared for each other and provided moral support. Conversion stories of young men were often related to drunkenness and violence. They told me in detail how they used to get themselves into trouble by leading what they now considered a very improper lifestyle – drinking, sleeping around, getting involved in fights and so on – and how by joining the church they had managed to become more responsible and serious persons<sup>5</sup>.

However, most people did not offer such easily comprehensible conversion stories. Many of those I asked I could not bring to tell me any particular reason why they joined, except for that they were looking for the truth (*fahamarinana*) and saw that what the Adventists say is right – in particular concerning the Sabbath as the proper day of worship –, and that therefore they got convinced and joined. Those who had been in either the Catholic or the Protestant church prior to their conversion to Seventh-day Adventism often expressed disappointment with their previous religious practice. The following extracts are typical examples:

“With the Catholics, the way they teach you, it is just like an empty belief. One simply learns things by heart as one recites at school.”<sup>6</sup> (Maman’ i Hery, Maroantsetra)

“I used to be a Protestant. But there I didn’t really learn anything much about what the Bible says. And I realized that the Adventists really explain things concerning God. That is what made me join them. With the Adventists, there is really sufficient Bible study! When I joined them, I

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<sup>5</sup> For the same point regarding similar churches see Ault 1987, Dudley, Mutch and Cruise 1987, Ammerman 1994b, Swanson 1994.

<sup>6</sup> *Tanatin’ izany, ôhatry ny finoanoam-pôna ny fombafomba ampianarina, tsianjery ny vavaka ampianarina hôtry manao tsianjery an-tsekoly. Finoanoam-pôna* also means ‘superstition’ (Rajaonarimanana 1995: 155). However what Maman’ i Hery means here is the literal meaning of the expression, i.e. empty belief.

was studying, I really began to study a lot! There is really a lot of study going on there. Because the point of going to church is to learn about God and His words.”<sup>7</sup> (Papan’ i Filiette, Sahameloka)

“[When I was a Protestant], there were a lot of things which I didn’t understand when I read the Bible and which they couldn’t explain to me either. For example ... what made me join the Adventist church ... I didn’t understand concerning the Sabbath when I was still a Protestant. I went to ask the Protestant pastor three times, and then he finally said to me: ‘Go and ask the Adventists, they can explain this [concerning the Sabbath] to you.’ One day, we [himself and a friend] went to see the Adventist pastor, and we asked him about many many things. We asked him fifteen questions in total. And he answered them all according to the Bible!”<sup>8</sup> (Papan’ i Lorica, Maroantsetra)

Let me recapitulate. We have seen that the members of the Adventist church in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka are very different kinds of people who lead different types of lifestyles. We have seen different backgrounds and positions in society, different educational levels and biographies. And although for the sake of presentation I have created two types of conversion stories, the most striking feature about them, looked at as a whole, is their diversity. Moreover, the members of the Adventist church do not

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<sup>7</sup> *Talôha zeny nivavaka tamin’ ny FJKM tao zaho. Tsy dia lasa nahomby tsara be le fianarana nataoko tamin’ ny le Soratra Masina ... tamin’ny FJKM tao. Hitako tsara be fô tamin’ny Advantista, tena ... nañambara tsara be mikasika an’ Andriamanitra. Zeny le tena nahatafiditra zaho tamin’ ny Advantista. Tena le ampy tsara be le fianarana! Tena le mianatra! Rehefa nandeha tatô, mianatra (drawn out and heightened to stress) tatô eh! Satria hianatra ny tenin’ Andriamanitra, hianatra ny momban’ Andriamanitra, zeny le dikany andehanana ampiangonana.*

<sup>8</sup> *Rehefa mandinika Soratra Masina aty izaho, isaka mahita ny teny tsy fantatro ..., satria misy teny tsy fantatro izy reo ao nazavaina na ... Ôhatra, nahalasa izaho Advantista dia, mikasika ny Sabata tsy fantatro, tamin’ izaho mbôla Protestanta. Rehefa nanontany le pastera Protestanta izaho, misy intelo vao izy nanapa-kevitra fô: ‘Mandehana amin’ny Advantista ianao fa ry zareo mahay manazava ny momba ity’, hoy izy. Indray andro, nandeha izahay, nahita ny pastera Advantista zahay. Nametraka fanontaniana maro maro ao amin’ny Soratra Masina izahay. Misy 15 fanontaniana napetrany tamin’azy. Dia voavaliny ara-tSoratra Masina!*

differ significantly from the overall population in terms of their ethnic and their religious background to which I now turn.

### **Ethnic and religious background, and age**

Most members of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Maroantsetra town originate from one of the villages of the district. A few of them are migrants from further away. This entirely reflects the overall picture of the town's population. All the members of the church in Sahameloka are either local or, in the case of most women who have married men from Sahameloka, from nearby villages.

In terms of their religious background as well, church members differ only slightly from the overall population. While only about half of the district's population has embraced Christianity, most Seventh-day Adventists already belonged to either the Catholic or the Protestant church when they converted<sup>9</sup>. Not very many without any previous church affiliation become Adventists. The number of former Protestants among the Seventh-day Adventists is proportionally slightly greater than that of Protestants in the entire district. In other words, the Adventists tend to be recruited from other Christian churches, in particular the Protestant<sup>10</sup>. However, this is a rough generalisation. For example Papan' i Beby, who is such a committed Adventist, seriously considered a career as a Catholic priest before he married Maman' i Beby. He was turned off, in his own words, by the racism and discrimination against black people inherent in Catholicism, as well as the hypocrisy of the priests in regard to their moral conduct. A couple of members of the Adventist church had tried out several New Christian Groups (Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Ara-Pilanzantsara) before joining the Adventist church. Both in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, most of the teenage members of the church were born into families already practising the Adventist faith, and so they did not go through the same process of conversion as their parents, or in rare cases their grandparents.

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<sup>9</sup> The level of their commitment is, of course, another question. Many of my informants told me that they only rarely used to go to church. However, as we have seen in the above conversion stories, some of the people who are Adventists today claim to have already had a lively interest in religious questions long before joining the church and stress their dissatisfaction while being Catholic or Protestant practitioners.

There is one further aspect which deserves to be mentioned, namely the age of church members. One of the striking features of the Adventist congregation in Sahameloka is the youth of its members<sup>10</sup>. With the exception of three couples in their late forties/early fifties who have grown up children, and one bachelor in his forties, all of them are young couples in their twenties or early thirties, or people not yet married. There are no really old people in the church except for one woman who rarely attends a Sabbath service, but who is not baptised as an Adventist. In Maroantsetra town, however, the picture is different. There, many old people who count as elders (*ray aman-dreny*) in Malagasy society are baptised members of the church and regularly attend Adventist church services not only on the Sabbath, but also during the week. While in Sahameloka the church is largely run by young people, it is the more senior members who have a leading role in Maroantsetra though this does not exclude younger people from actively participating. The reason for this ethnographic difference is not clear to me.

So, what are we left with? Basically, a picture of great variety and diversity and not any clear indication as to what the members of the Adventist church in the district might have in common. However, when we think about the literature on religious 'fundamentalism' as discussed in the introduction, there is one aspect which we would expect to play a crucial role, namely converts' socio-economic position.

### **Socio-economic status**

As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, the Seventh-day Adventists are perfectly 'normal' inhabitants of Maroantsetra and Sahameloka in terms of how they make a living. Those in Sahameloka farm their land; those in Maroantsetra have a variety of occupations: some work as civil servants, some as craftsmen, some sell products at the market and so on. And most of them own some land in their village of origin. Apart from one rich local family and a couple of migrants from the highlands, none of them belong to any local elite, economic and/or political. At the same time though, they are no poorer

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<sup>10</sup> According to an Adventist pastor from Madagascar's capital who visited Maroantsetra, this is also the case in regard to the whole country.

<sup>11</sup> Pfeiffer tells us that Seventh-day Adventists all over Africa are predominantly young (1985: 9). Gifford (1994: 516) has noted the same with regard to new churches in Africa.

than many other people in the district. Generally speaking, it is fair to say that they belong to the poorer sections of society without, however, being any kind of particularly poor minority.

Whilst it is very difficult to assess people's socio-economic position because of the lack of statistics, there are certain indications that the members of the Adventist church in the district of Maroantsetra are indeed among the poor, though not necessarily the very poor. First of all, I have been told by several church members in town that the Adventist church is the church of the poor<sup>12</sup>. The Pentecostals, however, are said to be even poorer<sup>13</sup>. Vavon' i Giselle (Giselle's aunt [sister of father]) is an old, extremely poor woman who has occasionally attended Adventist church services for years. She lives in a tiny room in Maroantsetra which serves as her bedroom, living room and kitchen, and all her belongings are rolled up in a corner where the floor is not broken. She explained to me that the reason she liked the Adventists was because she could go to their church without being looked down on for her shabby clothes and lack of shoes as she was when she was with the Catholics<sup>14</sup>.

At times church members also explicitly identify and sympathise with the poor. This was the case for instance when a group of members staged a little performance one Sabbath afternoon in church in Maroantsetra which related to poverty. There was a clear identification with those who have little or nothing, and the rich were portrayed as arrogant and selfish. On another occasion, a visiting pastor gave a sermon in church in which he emphasised that God's people have always been the poor. Thus it seems that many members of the Adventist church at least *perceive* themselves to be among the less fortunate.

Another indication of members' relative poverty I see in the fact that some of them sometimes give a very small donation in church<sup>15</sup>. I have observed many times, also in town, that someone gave less than 500 Fmg which even for a poor person would not

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<sup>12</sup> People used expressions such as *tsy manam-bôla* (they don't have any money), *mahantra* (they are poor), *sahirana be* (they struggle), *ambany jiaby* (they are all low [of low status]).

<sup>13</sup> *Tena sahirana be mihintsy* (they really struggle a lot!)! *Tena mijaly* (they really have a very difficult time)!

<sup>14</sup> *Tsy miavona. Tsy mihafakafaka.*

<sup>15</sup> Donations are collected every Sabbath. The money is divided among the local, the national and the international church.



have been much (worth about one cup of rice or one pineapple)<sup>16</sup>. The reason why this is indicative of poverty is that there is an expectation for people to give at least 500 Fmg, and those who cannot give that much seem embarrassed when the hat passes by and they only put in some small coins or nothing. If they could give more, I am quite sure, they would.

But perhaps one of the best indicators of people's financial means is the way they dress in church and on occasions such as New Year, as already mentioned in the introduction. While one does not see anybody barefoot in the Catholic or Protestant church of Maroantsetra town, I have seen many members of the Adventist church dressed in stained or mended second hand clothes and not even wearing plastic slippers, let alone shoes, even on their day of baptism. This is a day they hold very important and I am certain they would have put on some footwear for that particular occasion had they had any<sup>17</sup>. On one occasion for example, 106 new members were baptised during a district meeting (these take place every three months) which attracted hundreds of church members. Half of them were barefoot and not one of them wore proper shoes. However, Seventh-day Adventism in the district of Maroantsetra is very largely a rural movement, and so most of these people came from villages in the countryside. There, many Catholics have no shoes either. Nevertheless, if one compares the general appearance of the Adventist congregation on a normal Sabbath with a crowd of Protestants, and even more so Catholics, dressed up for church, the difference in wealth is rather obvious. However, this is not the case in villages in the countryside such as Sahameloka. There, the dress code seems less significant and there is no visible difference between the Adventist and the Protestant or the Catholic congregation.

I conclude from these observations that the Adventists of the district tend to be found among the poorer sections of society, but that they are not of one socio-economic class<sup>18</sup>.

One of the reasons why I decided to go and live in Sahameloka a year into fieldwork was because I wanted to investigate a possible link between slave descent and

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<sup>16</sup> Most people tended to give 500 Fmg, better off people often gave 1000Fmg.

<sup>17</sup> Freeman (2001: 136) also notes footwear as an important status marker among the Betsileo.

<sup>18</sup> Gifford has come to the same conclusion in his study on new churches in Africa (1994: 516).

Seventh-day Adventism. As I mentioned in the introduction, Sahameloka has a disproportionately high number of Seventh-day Adventists. At the time of my fieldwork, almost 10% of the adult population of the village had become members of the Adventist church, in comparison to 1% in the entire district. At the same time, as we have seen, the inhabitants of Sahameloka are largely of slave descent. Thus it would be tempting to conclude that, at least in the case of Sahameloka, conversion to Adventism is to do with the fact that these are people of slave descent. The literature on religious 'fundamentalism' would clearly suggest such a conclusion. People of slave descent, the argument would run, are attracted to Seventh-day Adventism because they are not only of low economic status, but are also socially stigmatised. Thus they seek to redefine their identity and they perceive the Adventist church as offering them an alternative route to integration. However, does the specific ethnographic data on the village of Sahameloka justify the conclusion that people of slave descent are particularly likely to become Seventh-day Adventists<sup>19</sup>?

By the end of 1998 there was a total of 47 Seventh-day Adventist congregations in the district of Maroantsetra. I easily obtained the number of church members in each and every one of these 47 congregations from the pastor who was always more than happy to provide me with the information I required. It was, however, impossible to find out which villages were the homes of descendants of slaves. Because of the sensitivity of the issue, there is neither any kind of public information on it, nor can one ask people about it and expect an answer. However, I can offer one indication. Although the Adventist congregations are distributed all over the region, there are certain areas where the church seems particularly successful. One of these is the upper Andranofotsy valley where Sahameloka is located. According to Petit (1967: 29, 36), this is exactly the area where ex-slaves founded new villages after the abolition of slavery at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the Adventist church is also very successful in other villages<sup>20</sup> on which I have no information regarding people's descent. It is also true that there are practically no Adventists in Andranofotsy, the stronghold of the Zafindrabay still largely

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<sup>19</sup> I do not have sufficient ethnographic data on the slave descent of either the overall population of Maroantsetra town or the members of the Adventist church in Maroantsetra to investigate the issue in regard to the Adventist congregation in town.

inhabited by their descendants<sup>21</sup>. However, the above information provides but a vague indication of a possible relationship between Seventh-day Adventism and slave descent.

Be that as it may, in Sahameloka, the majority of people *are* of slave descent and the number of Seventh-day Adventists *is* disproportionately high. However, when we look in more detail at the distribution of church members among the village's ancestries the picture starts to become rather more complicated and less clear.

In chapter 2 I have outlined that four of seven ancestries who live in Sahameloka are almost certainly of slave descent. However, substantial numbers of Adventists are only found in two of these four ancestries of slave descent<sup>22</sup>; the third has only one Adventist member and the fourth has none at all. A significant number of Adventists is also found among the ancestry which has resulted from the marriage between a (male) Zafindrabay descendant and a (female) descendant of their ex-slaves. There are no Adventists among the descendants of the Zafindrabay, and only one among the recent immigrant group from the south of Madagascar. In sum: the members of the Adventist church in Sahameloka belong to three of seven ancestries. Although it is true that it is precisely the two ancestries who are not of slave descent who do not have any Adventists, it is also true that there are none in another two ancestries whose 'great ancestors' (*razam-be*) were ex-slaves. The following summary may make this information clearer. In the ancestries underlined, there is more than one Adventist.

*ancestries of slave descent: Besoana, Môrafeno, Nandrasana, Ambodimanga*

*ancestries not of slave descent: Antisahameloka, Antaimoro*

*ancestry of mixed origin: Maroantseva*

Thus the evidence is highly ambiguous and does not reveal any clear connection between being of slave descent and joining the Adventist church. The high proportion of Seventh-day Adventists in the village could just as well have to do with a kind of chain

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<sup>20</sup> E.g. Mariarano in the upper Antainambalana valley and Rantobe in the southern part of the district.

<sup>21</sup> Most people would shy away from actually uttering the word Zafindrabay. Instead, they would refer to "the people from Andranofotsy" (*ny ôlo avy any Andranofotsy*) or the 'masters of the land' (*tompontany*)

conversion within particular ancestries resulting in the clusters of church members we observe, as it could with people's slave descent.

While I have here only considered the demographic evidence relating to a possible connection between Seventh-day Adventism and slave descent in Sahameloka, the issue deserves more attention. Therefore, I will come back to it and comment on it more generally in the conclusions to this thesis.

In this chapter, I have provided a number of portraits – they have shown a very colourful picture. I have retold conversion stories – they have been varied. I have described the religious and ethnic background of church members – it suggests diversity more than commonalities. And the data on the Adventists' socio-economic position in general, and concerning a possible link between slave descent and Adventism in particular, has proven highly ambiguous. So what, if anything, do the members of the church have in common? What brings them together?

Perhaps it will prove more fruitful to leave the question of *who* exactly joins the church and *why* they do so and concentrate on what *meaning* church members find in their daily involvement in Adventism. This is the perspective I want to take in the following chapters.

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<sup>22</sup>The following information excludes all Adventist women whose ancestries are located in other villages on which I have no further data.

## Chapter 4

### Organisation, participation, seniority and authority

#### Organisation

Globally, the Seventh-day Adventist church is organised along several hierarchically related levels from, at the top, the General Conference (global church) with headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland (Washington DC), to, at the bottom, any local church anywhere in the world<sup>1</sup>. Sahameloka and Washington, for example, are linked by a string of ever larger geographical and organisational units of which Sahameloka is part, including the community of Antakotako (incorporating Sahameloka and a handful of other nearby villages), to the district of Maroantsetra, to the *Fédération du Centre* of Madagascar (the country is divided into three federations), to the Indian Ocean Division and beyond.

The degree to which people in Madagascar are aware of their membership in organisational units of the Seventh-day Adventist church reaching beyond the island varies significantly and largely depends on their knowledge of the geography of the world, which in a place such as Sahameloka is generally extremely hazy and beyond most people's grasp. However, church members are routinely reminded of the fact that they are part of a globally organised church in various ways. Seventh-day Adventists are meant to engage in daily Bible study following lessons provided in a three-monthly booklet called the Bible Study Guide. All around the world, Adventists use translations of the very same text (more details in chapter 9). Most families in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka had at least one copy of the Bible Study Guide and were clearly aware that they were reading the same text as all the other Adventists 'on the other side of the sea' (*andafy*).

On the local level in Madagascar, not every Adventist congregation has the same official status. A group of people interested in Adventism who meet informally on Saturdays to pray and study the Bible is not officially recognised as a Seventh-day

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<sup>1</sup> For details see Vance 1999, chapter 3. Or consult the website of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (<http://www.Adventist.org/worldchurch/>)

Adventist congregation. Such groups nevertheless appear in the statistics of the church<sup>2</sup> and the local pastor and other baptised members of the church may spend considerable time with them in an attempt to solidify their commitment. When a group's numbers increase to 5-10 baptised members of the Adventist church, they select a *Directeur d'Église* amongst their ranks, which enables them to become recognised as a *Groupe organisée*. This move needs no specific authorisation except for the consent of the local pastor. To become an *Église organisée* however – that is, an officially recognised Adventist congregation – requires the authorisation of the local pastor based on three criteria: first, spiritual maturity; second, at least twenty baptised members and a proposal of named persons willing to take on particular offices; and third, financial independence. The local pastor's decision to accept a new *Église organisée* needs to be confirmed by the Adventist headquarters in Madagascar's capital<sup>3</sup>.

Thus, on the structural level, the Seventh-day Adventist church in Madagascar and elsewhere is organised along clearly hierarchical lines and disregarding the regulations may entail reprimand. For example one day during my fieldwork a large group of Seventh-day Adventists from a town further north (Andapa) turned up in Maroantsetra in order to proselytize in the area. This they had decided to do without the authorisation of either their own pastor or the one working in Maroantsetra, and nobody had heard a word about their venture before they arrived. Besides, the town where they came from belongs to a different Adventist federation than Maroantsetra, which meant they would have needed a specific authorisation from the centre in the capital to embark on their mission work. They had clearly breached a number of rules. Thus when they suddenly turned up out of the blue, they were ignored and boycotted by the pastor of Maroantsetra and were denied access to the church.

## Participation

However, the rather rigid administrative and organisational structure of the church is counterbalanced by the active participation of all members in important decision-making

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<sup>2</sup> The 47 Adventist congregations in the district mentioned in the introduction includes such groups.

<sup>3</sup> The village of Sahameloka became a *Groupe Organisée* in 1996 and an *Eglise Organisée* in 1998.

processes. This has been observed by other researchers on Seventh-day Adventism as well<sup>4</sup>. Kessler for example notes:

“Adventist church organization is based on a combination of democratic and authoritarian principles, which leaves room for local and regional initiative and nevertheless maintains central authority” (Kessler 1967: 226).

In every *Eglise organisée*, there are a number of duties and offices to be held, such as being a lay leader (*loholona, lôhôlo*), a deacon, a treasurer, or a *président* of mission work or of the women’s or the youth organisation within the local Adventist church. The people holding such offices are democratically elected on an annual basis in a process which involves several stages and commissions, and in which every baptised member of the church can have a say and speak up against a particular candidate they consider morally or otherwise unfit to be given special duties within the church (the same is the case with candidates for baptism)<sup>5</sup>. The members elected in this way hold specific offices and together form the local committee (*comité*) which deals with the affairs of, or problems within, the church on a regular basis for one year<sup>6</sup>.

This formal participation of all baptised members in church affairs is mirrored in the fact that everyone who wishes to do so (including people who are not yet baptised, or visitors [*vahiny*] such as myself), can actively participate in any Seventh-day Adventist church service. And indeed, such participation is always strongly encouraged.

The first time I walked into the Adventist church in Maroantsetra and sat through a service, I was astonished by the number of people taking an active role in it. I kept asking Maman’ i Beby, next to whom I was sitting, who all the people performing some kind of task during the service were. “They are just ordinary [members of the church] (*ôlo tsotra fô*)”; the answer surprised me. As I came to learn in the course of time, an

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<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Josephides 1982: 145-154 on an Adventist community in Papua New Guinea in the 1970s.

<sup>5</sup> Since I am not a baptised member of the Adventist church, I was not allowed to attend these meetings. Thus the information given here is based on what I have been told. See also Vance 1999: 59-60.

Adventist church service is not at all dominated by the pastor, even if he is there. Many lay members play an active role, reading from the Bible, explaining Biblical texts, giving sermons, announcing songs or leading the prayers. Organisational matters, such as mission work to be undertaken, are jointly discussed as well. Sitting in church and watching the proceedings, I often felt that had I not already known who the pastor was I would not be able to tell. I remember one occasion when the pastor's role was limited to musical accompaniment on an electrical keyboard, while seven members of the congregation led the Sabbath service<sup>7</sup>. The pastor who worked in Maroantsetra while I lived there spent many Sabbaths in the countryside with one of the rural congregations of the church. The service was conducted in the same way with or without him. And indeed, the *rural* congregations normally rely entirely on themselves to run their church, since there is only one Adventist pastor in the entire district<sup>8</sup>.

I should also mention that it is possible for people to be banned from taking on any specific role during church services other than that of being an ordinary participant; and indeed, this seems to happen rather often. Such a ban is usually placed on someone for morally unacceptable behaviour, especially premarital sexual relations. The ban is lifted after the person in question has received Communion. The decision to place a ban on someone and to lift it is taken by the local church committee.

Although some people, in particular elected lay leaders, are active much more often than others and some, often old women, are never active at all, it is not always the same people who lead or have a prominent role to play during church services<sup>9</sup>. This is the case both in Maroantsetra town and in Sahameloka, though there is less rotation in

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<sup>6</sup> All of these regulations are explicated in the Malagasy version of the Church Manual (Fitsipika Mifehy ny Fiangonana, 1993. Antananarivo: Imprimerie Adventiste).

<sup>7</sup> The strong participation of lay people has been noted by many writers on different religious movements classified as fundamentalist (see e.g. Martin 1990: 292, Maxwell 1998a: 257, Corten 1999: 25, 127, 135. Concerning Seventh-day Adventism: Hoekema 1963: 5, Josephides 1982: 145-154, Westermarck 1998: 56). Kessler suggests that the extraordinary success of the Adventist church in Peru is due to the fact that the educational program was from the beginning put into the hands of the American-Indian participants (1967: 242).

<sup>8</sup> Although the Catholic and Protestant congregations in the countryside do not have a priest/pastor either, it is my impression that their church services are led by church elders without the active participation of other members.

<sup>9</sup> The decision as to who is going to lead on a particular day is a mixture of people volunteering and the pastor and/or the committee selecting people and assigning them particular duties such as to read a passage from the Bible.



the village where the number of people available is smaller and there are fewer people literate enough to give a sermon based on numerous references right across the entire Bible.

Not only is it not always the same individuals who *lead* Adventist church services, but everyone present, young and old, men and women, can actively participate and many indeed do so. Among the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka I did not encounter the patriarchal structure or atmosphere often said to be characteristic of 'fundamentalist' churches in the literature<sup>10</sup>. On the whole, Malagasy societies have a comparatively strong tendency towards gender egalitarianism (see for example Bloch 1987, 1992, 1993a; Lambek 1992b), and this does not change when Malagasy people become Seventh-day Adventists. It is true that the Adventist church does not allow women to become pastors or lay church leaders. It is also true that, with the exception of wives or widows of pastors, only men can lead Bible discussions during the Sabbath service (at least this was the case in my fieldsites, see below and chapter 9). Men also almost always give the Sabbath sermon though, as far as I know, there is no rule regarding this. But apart from these gender differences, women are as active and as vocal as men, both in church and at home, when engaging in Adventist religious practice, and I have never observed women's opinions and views being taken in any way less seriously than men's.

Moreover, young and old participate equally. The Wednesday evening church services – one of several services a week – are almost always led by one more experienced member of the church together with a person in their teens, boy or girl, who is assigned easy tasks such as announcing songs or reading a short passage from the Bible. As Papan' i Silivie once explained in church, it is important for the young to learn to take responsibilities and duties within the church from an early age in order to secure its future success and its members' continued impetus.

In fact, the insignificance of age is one of the striking features not only of Adventist church services, but of Adventist religious practice as I observed it in general. In my host family in Sahameloka, Claude, who was twenty, was much more literate than both his parents, and in particular his father. Therefore, it was he who played the role of

teacher when the family studied the daily lesson provided in the Adventist Bible Study Guide mentioned above. On most days, it was Claude who read the actual text, and it was he who led the discussion and who provided most interpretations and clarifications (see chapter 9). Claude and his parents – the younger children did not actively take part in these studies – were at these moments of Bible study at home a group of equals who discussed a text they were interested to understand. Claude's role as 'teacher' was based on the fact that being more literate than his parents, it was easiest for him to actually read the text; he had also done more Bible study in general than his parents and thus his expertise in Biblical matters was superior to theirs.

One of the central parts of every Adventist Sabbath service is what is called the Sabbath School which I will discuss at length in chapter 9. During Sabbath School, the adult church members engage in group discussions of the texts in the Bible Study Guide they have read at home in the course of the past week. The point of these discussions, as I will discuss later, is very much the participation of all. However, in every group, there is a kind of 'class teacher', called *moniteur*, whose role it is to chair the discussion and to encourage everyone to participate. Although some members, such as Papan' i Beby in Maroantsetra, take on this role very often, different *moniteurs* are chosen every week<sup>11</sup>. Any adult male baptised member can be a *moniteur*. Thus it is not rare for someone the age of Kiki (eighteen) to be the *moniteur* of a discussion group which includes elderly people.

### Seniority

The reason I emphasise this irrelevance of age is that it to some extent represents a radical break with notions of seniority which are highly significant all over Madagascar. As is widely documented in Malagasy ethnography, age – or its social representation – is a crucial aspect of status (see e.g. Lambek 1992b: 77-80, Bloch 1993b). Although in my experience, daily behaviour between younger and older people varies considerably in different parts of Madagascar, everywhere juniors are expected to show deference

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<sup>10</sup> In fact, the stress on education of girls as much as boys on the part of the Seventh-day Adventist church has in some contexts met with local resistance (Nyaundi 1997: 78-84).

<sup>11</sup> The local church committee gets together every Friday evening to decide who is going to have what kind of duty during next day's Sabbath service.

towards their seniors, in particular kin, but others as well. Senior people are approached and treated respectfully and one does not contradict what they say. If anything, one seeks their advice and consent. In short, age is a crucial criterion guiding social behaviour. This seems to be the case all over Madagascar. Despite the fact that people in the area of Maroantsetra do not exhibit deference towards their seniors in daily life as visibly and markedly as, for example, the Betsileo do (see Freeman 2001: 171-173), a situation such as I have described where an eighteen-year old acts as 'teacher' to a man of sixty or over is quite unthinkable in any other context I have observed.

Also, seniority is not a prerequisite to become a lay leader of the Adventist church, which is why I have decided to translate *lôhôlo* (*loholona*) as lay leader and not as elder<sup>12</sup>. The basis of being elected as lay leader is a combination of several criteria, but in particular literacy, Biblical expertise, moral integrity and commitment to the church<sup>13</sup>. Thus in Sahameloka for example, the two *lôhôlo* at the time of my fieldwork were two young men, one in his early thirties, one in his mid-twenties, while more senior, but less literate, people, were ordinary members of the church.

The choice of Adventist *lôhôlo* is not only interesting in view of the Malagasy concept of seniority, but also in comparison with hierarchies within the mainstream churches. I lack the necessary information on hierarchies within the Catholic and the Protestant churches in Maroantsetra. But based on comparative ethnography, it seems very likely that these would reflect socio-political power and influence in the wider society. Bloch, for example, has discussed how, among the Merina of highland Madagascar, social hierarchies are reflected within the Protestant church. An influential member of society is much more likely to also become an influential member of the Protestant or Catholic church, not because of any particular religious commitment or other qualifications, but because of his social position. In short, social and church hierarchies are mutually reinforcing (Bloch 1994b). However, this is not at all the case with the Seventh-day Adventist churches in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka. Being chosen as lay leader of the Adventist church depends on criteria to do with competence and

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<sup>12</sup> In the English version of the Church Manual, however, the word 'elder' is used to refer to this position.

commitment. And this is not just the public rhetoric, but, as far as I could observe, the reality as well. The lay leaders in both Maroantsetra and in Sahameloka were not people who were in any way more influential – socially, politically or economically – than other church members. Razaka for example was one of the elected lay leaders in Maroantsetra. Razaka was young (he was in his early thirties), he did not have any proper job, and he is likely to be of slave descent. Of the two lay leaders in Sahameloka one at least is definitely of slave descent, but they were the best educated and most competent in Biblical matters. Vice versa, a person does not become more influential socially by virtue of being an Adventist *lôhôlo*. Indeed, it is not just my supposition that this situation stands in sharp contrast to the reality within the Catholic and the Protestant churches; several members of the Adventist church have told me as much explicitly.

Let me now return to the issue of seniority. I have noted that in my fieldsites, age seems to play a surprisingly insignificant role among the Seventh-day Adventists. However, when one looks closely at what is going on, one realizes that Adventist practice does not, as such, imply a challenge to the Malagasy concept of seniority, but that the two co-exist.

First of all, while elders in Malagasy societies are associated with morality and wisdom as revealed by the ancestors (see e.g. Bloch 1993b: 99-100, Cole 2001: 283-284), and therefore what they say is almost unchallengeable, being a *lôhôlo* of the Adventist church does not in any way imply moral authority. For example, when during my stay in Sahameloka one of the elected *lôhôlo* fell out with the rest of the congregation over an issue of money, the local committee withdrew his right to act as leader and to perform his duties in that capacity. Indeed, he was excluded from any active participation in church whatsoever until the issue would be resolved (which it still had not been several months later when I left the field). After having been *Dirécteur d'Église* of the local church for several years, and then *lôhôlo*, he was now sitting at the back of the church without uttering a word.

Indeed, the concept of an elder and of a church leader are completely different and different expressions are used to refer to them. While a senior person in Madagascar

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<sup>13</sup> While in Sahameloka most people felt that a lay leader ought to be a married person (*ôlo mitôndra trano*, literally: a person who has their own household), in Maroantsetra, there was, for example, the case of Razaka, a thirty-two-year old unmarried man.

is referred to as *ray aman-dreny* – which literally means ‘father and mother’ – the term *lôhôlo* means ‘head of the people’.

Secondly, even though *inside the church* a young man may, when leading a service, call upon his uncle, or even father, to step forward and perform some kind of task, such as reading a particular passage from the Bible, the minute the two men step *outside the church*, they are back with their traditional roles as senior and junior kinsmen. Other than in the context of Bible study, Papan’ i Claude has full authority over his son, and Claude would never dream of challenging the authority of his father or that of other church members who are his senior. I have observed this code switching many times, both in town and in the village, and most of the time it happens totally smoothly and skillfully. In the rare cases when junior members of the church fail to act according to the seniority principle outside the church, they are sharply reprimanded by their seniors as everyone else would be, irrespective of their position within the church.

Thirdly, the notion of seniority and of elderhood is not excluded even from *within* the Adventist church. First, the position of the Adventist pastor is not that of *lôhôlo*, but he and his wife are considered the *ray aman-dreny* (‘father and mother’, senior kinsmen) of all the members of the local church regardless of their actual age<sup>14</sup>. This is why, Maman’ i Beby explained to me, one ought to show them respect, not because of their status within the church hierarchy. Around New Year, the pastor and his wife are paid a visit by a large number of representatives of the Adventist community of the district and are presented with gifts in imitation of a local custom between kin, and in particular towards one’s *ray aman-dreny*.

Moreover, older members of the Adventist church are treated with respect, regardless of whether or not they are *lôhôlo* or hold any particular office within the church organisation. As I already mentioned, Papan’ i Claude cannot act as lay leader of the church in Sahameloka due to his insufficient literacy. But because he is the most senior of all Adventists in the village, he was made the honorary member of the village’s church committee.

The traditional concept of seniority also came to the fore shortly before I left Sahameloka. In order to thank everyone for the hospitality and generosity they had

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<sup>14</sup> In this case, it is the social representation of seniority which matters rather than actual age.

shown towards me, I stepped forward the last evening I attended church, accompanied by Papan' i Silivie who at that time acted as *lôhôlo*<sup>15</sup> and to whom I handed over an envelope with some money for the village's congregation. After I had expressed my thanks and given him my farewell present, he replied in a perfectly Malagasy speech fashion in more or less these words: 'I am but a child (*mbôla zazahely izaho*) and know nothing. Therefore I want to ask the *ray aman-dreny* among us to respond to what our sister has said and to wish her well on behalf of all of us', thus giving the floor to Papan' i Fredel who was the oldest member present that day.

In other words, it is only strictly within the context of Adventist church services, and in particular Bible study, that age becomes irrelevant. As soon as that specific context is left, even if physically people are still in church, traditional notions of seniority prevail. Relevance and irrelevance of age co-exist according to context. One conclusion I draw from this is that despite the young age of many, and in Sahameloka most, church members, involvement with the Seventh-day Adventist church is, in the context I study, not to do with a desire to challenge the authority of elders. Keeping these qualifications in mind, it is nevertheless striking and significant that Adventist religious practice produces many situations in which age relations become irrelevant to quite an extraordinary extent.

It is also interesting to note in this context that conversion to Adventism within a nuclear family or ancestry is very often initiated by junior members<sup>16</sup>. Papan' and Maman' i Fredel, for example, followed their sons into the Adventist church. And within Papan' i Fredel's ancestry, many members of whom have by now converted to Adventism, it was Ranary, a then unmarried man in his twenties, who first joined the church. Many of his kin, and indeed other church members in Sahameloka, attribute their own conversion partly to Ranary's teachings. While it seems to be mostly young men who initiate conversion, this is only a rule of thumb. In the case of my host family in Sahameloka for example, it is quite clear that Maman' i Claude had been the driving force behind the family's conversion to Adventism.

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<sup>15</sup> In fact, he had not been elected as such, but because of recent problems with both the village's *lôhôlo*, had taken over that role.

## Authority

I have already pointed to the Adventists' critical attitude towards authority. Now, to end this chapter, let me take up the issue again and discuss it in more depth. Many analysts stress that 'fundamentalists' have a particularly strong desire for clear authority. Hence their uncritical acceptance of particular texts as well as hierarchical leadership structures. The "quest for authority" (Percy 1996: 166), or similar expressions, is indeed often part of definitions of religious 'fundamentalism'<sup>17</sup>. It is true that the Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka as well accept the Bible as authoritative. And they are not critical towards the concept of authority *as such*, on the contrary. The idea that everyone *must* choose between either serving God or Satan as their master (*tompo*), and that total freedom is not a possibility open to human beings, is indeed very strong among them as I will elaborate in chapter 7. However, the local Adventists completely refuse *human* authority in religious matters, and I presume this to be the case for Seventh-day Adventists world-wide. The alleged date of Christ's birth, as declared by some pope or other, is null and void for the church members I know, since it is based on *human* authority. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that Jesus was born in December, Maman' i Claude explained to me as we were harvesting rice in the summer heat. Hence Seventh-day Adventists do not celebrate Christmas, or Easter and Pentecost, since all of these celebrations are based on wrong human calculations. Nobody knows when, exactly, Jesus was born, but historians and archeologists have found out, Papan' i Beby explained, that it must have been in the European spring, i.e. not in December. Papan' i Fredel embarked on a similar line of thought with regard to Sunday as the day of worship:

"When we look in the Bible, [we understand that] it was *people* who invented Sunday as the day of worship, but not God. That's explained in

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<sup>16</sup> Chowning (1990: 35-37) tells us that among the Kove of Papua New Guinea, it was primarily the *children* who first joined the Adventist church because they found the Adventist schools much better than the Catholic ones.

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. Marty 1992: 20, Coleman, J. 1992: 75.

this book<sup>18</sup> ... there it says that the Sabbath has always been the day of God, but that it was *we* who replaced the Sabbath with Sunday. It was some *Monseigneur* [people in Maroantsetra use this expression when referring to Catholic priests] who signed this in the year 321.”<sup>19</sup>

Not only does this quote express criticism towards human authority, but there is also a strong sense that the truth – that the Sabbath is the proper day of worship – has been intentionally hidden. This is a crucial point and I will come back to it in due course.

For church members in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka being an Adventist is, partly, about critically investigating authority. In contrast, they often talk of the Catholics, and to a lesser extent of the Protestants as well, as the epitome of people blindly following authority. And interestingly, the uncritical acceptance of human authority is linked to the Catholics’ and Protestants’ lack of knowledge of the Bible and their lack of inquiry. Were they to actually read the Bible, they would, for example, come across the Ten Commandments, and they would start to wonder and want to know why they go to church on Sunday, when the Fourth Commandment clearly states that God has chosen the Sabbath (Saturday) as the day of worship. “But”, Papan’ i Beby concluded one of his many explications to me, “they [the Catholics] don’t ask [any questions]” (*tsy manontany zare*).

The Adventists’ scepticism towards human authority does not, however, stop at the doorstep of their own church. As part of his conversion story, Papan’ i Filiette explained:

“During study times in church, someone in front reads from the Bible, but the others all look into their own Bible, in case he or she is wrong. If there

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<sup>18</sup> This was probably a book by Ellen White.

<sup>19</sup> *Ny andro Alahady, raha zahana amin’ ny Baiboly akô, raha foronin’ olombelona fô ny andro Alahady fô tsy Andriamanitra namoro azy. Amin’ ny boky akô, hita fô, Sabata hatrany hatrany ny andron’ ny Tompo hoy izy, fa zahay no nañôvana ny Alahady misolo ny Sabata. Nañôvan-jare Monsenera sonia tamin’ ny taono trois cents vingt et un.*



is a mistake, the others will realize it and the person in front must start all over again. That's what convinced me."<sup>20</sup>

Although the hierarchical structure of the Adventist church gives certain people the right to make decisions and to authorise or sanction certain actions, it does not give anyone higher *spiritual* or *moral* authority, not even the pastor. In the above story of a group of Adventists suddenly turning up in Maroantsetra to proselytise without having previously informed anybody about their mission, the pastor denied them access to the church. The majority of the members of the church in Maroantsetra, however, felt that people intent on spreading the gospel were doing 'God's work' (*asan' Andriamanitra*) regardless of whether or not they had breached the church's regulations. Thus against the pastor's explicit opinion on the matter, they organised food and shelter for the guests as well as a locality for them to hold public events. Ironically, as a result of the mission work of this group, within a couple of months, large numbers of people in the district converted to Adventism making Maroantsetra 'district of the year' with the largest number of converts in all of Madagascar for which the *pastor* was rewarded with a trip to Mauritius<sup>21</sup>.

In fact, the spiritual authority of the pastor is limited to ritual contexts. Unless specifically authorised, baptism in particular can only be carried out by a pastor. The Communion (which follows a feet-washing ritual) is normally led by the pastor, but if he happens not to be around, elected lay leaders of the church can go ahead with it as well<sup>22</sup>.

Neither does administrative authority give a person a monopoly over Bible interpretation. Of course the pastor knows the Bible much better than most other members of the church who therefore happily accept his explanations and interpretations most of the time. However, they do this not because a pastor, by virtue of his office, has any claims to better understanding than any other member of the church. Nor is he

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<sup>20</sup> *Amin' ny fotoan' ny fianarana, le alôha arôa mamaky Baiboly, atiô mizaha sintry, sao izy diso, sao izy diso. Rehefa misy diso, ilay any iny hitanao ake ilay raha. Tsy mahazo azy, aeriny ka. Zeny naharesy lahatra zaho.*

<sup>21</sup> Faneva Advantista 1999:17-18. Personal communication with Isaac Ranala, Adventist pastor of Maroantsetra.

<sup>22</sup> On one occasion I observed, the pastor in Maroantsetra did not utter a single word during Communion though he was sitting in front of the church facing the congregation together with two lay leaders who did all the talking and reading.

necessarily right in case of dispute over interpretations of the Bible and proper behaviour according to it. And when it happens that different pastors have diverging opinions on a particular matter, which I witnessed concerning the question of contraception, it is up to every single member of the congregation to make up their mind as to who is right<sup>23</sup>.

This situation is in fact not unique. Lehmann (1998: 617-621) and Bruce (2000: 98) have pointed out that although ‘fundamentalists’ are convinced of the inerrancy of their sacred text (this is often a key feature in definitions of religious ‘fundamentalism’), to discover what exactly that text says is, according to ‘fundamentalist’ doctrine, up to everyone who is willing to do so and thus there is by definition no authoritative interpretation<sup>24</sup>. However, this ‘interpretative egalitarianism’ does not apply to the basics of Seventh-day Adventism either in terms of doctrine or behaviour. The creation of the world in six days for example or, in the area of Maroantsetra, the rejection of exhumation, are not negotiable and it is not up to every member of the congregation to form their individual opinion on such fundamental issues.

In line with the Protestant tradition where Seventh-day Adventism has its historical roots, church members are also highly critical towards church hierarchies, both those of churches they formerly belonged to, and those of the Adventist church<sup>25</sup>. Papan’ i Filiette was particularly eloquent regarding this issue:

“What got me thinking, and this is why I left the Protestant church”, he began, “it was like ... I don’t like serving [praying to] people. Yet, something happened ... it was like serving people”. I asked him what he meant by that. “We used to live in Sahambatra [a village across the river from Sahameloka]”, he continued, “and I was a [lay] leader of the [Protestant] church. We were collecting money to build a proper church. But then came a letter from ‘above’ [the Protestant church in Maroantsetra]

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<sup>23</sup> This does not rule out the possibility of the global or regional headquarters of the Seventh-day Adventist church issuing a particular opinion or guideline on any given issue.

<sup>24</sup> According to Bruce, a crucial reason accounting for the particular success of fundamentalism within Evangelical Protestantism and Islam is precisely the fact that within these religious traditions “authoritative knowledge is democratically available” and that “...any right-spirited person can discern God’s will by reading the scriptures or studying the Qur’an”, in contrast to the authority of the papacy for example (Bruce 2000: 98).

<sup>25</sup> Already Weber (1920b: 229) recognised the anti-authoritarian attitude of Protestant sects.

and they demanded our money [that we had collected]. The church never got built, it never got finished. My heart became very ‘weak’ because of that. We had been organising lots of events in order to raise money, but the church never got finished. And I said: No, I won’t pray to people, I’ll go and join the Adventists. And I went and asked them how they handled money, and they said that it is all a matter of serving God, that they really served God.”<sup>26</sup>

But hierarchies are resisted also within the Adventist church. During my fieldwork, there was quite a serious conflict going on between the local pastor, on the one side, and several members of the congregation in Maroantsetra, on the other, and I was told that it was not a new one either<sup>27</sup>. My insight into the reasons for this conflict – which manifested itself in diverse kinds of ways<sup>28</sup> – is limited by the fact that my host family in town was very friendly with the pastor and clearly sided with him, and thus other people were disinclined to talk to me about it. However, I believe that it had very much to do with the fact that the pastor and his family were not local people. As such, that would not have been a problem; one of the characteristics of Maroantsetra town, as we have seen, is the diverse origins of its population. But the pastor was not from the coast, and he spoke a dialect identified by local people as the language of the educated elite of Madagascar. Thus he was perceived to be, and referred to as, a Merina, which in fact he is not (he is a Sihanaka). The district of Maroantsetra was at one time under Merina rule like much of Madagascar. In the view of most local people, the Merina are to this day the elite ruling the country and are associated with the domination and

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<sup>26</sup> *Zavatra nampandeha ieritreritra zaho, izaho niala tamin’ ny FJKM tao, hitako ... karaha ôlo ... izaho tsy te hivavaka amin’ ny ôlo. Nefa zeny, misy zavatra indraiky karaha hitako... karaha ôlo mbôla mivavaka amin’ ny ôlo. ( ...) Zahay nipetraka Sahambatra tatô, zahay lôham-piangonana. Ke zahay nitady vôla hañamboarana le trano fiangonana. Avy taratasy avy any ambony zeny, malaka le vôla avy aminay aty. Manjary tsy vita le trano, tsy efa. Nalemy ny fon’ ahy tamin’ ny raha io. Zahay nañano fety isan’ andro isan’ andro amin’ ny raha, tsy tanteraka io raha. Izaho tsy ôlo mivavaka amin’ ny ôlo, izaho handeha amin’ ny fiangonana Advantista zaho, hoy izaho. Take tsôfotra takô izaho. Manakôrikôry le fiainana zeny mikasika le vôla. Eh, hoy zare fô, mikasika ara-bôla, hoy zare fô, resaka amin’ ny fanompoana Andriamanitra ...tena le fanompoana Andriamanitra.*

<sup>27</sup> The rural congregations were not involved in this conflict.

exploitation of the coastal people. At times, the conflict within the church in Maroantsetra escalated to the extent that the group opposed to the pastor sent letters of complaint about him to the Adventist headquarters in the capital. In my view, what they were reacting against was the class association<sup>29</sup> of the pastor which then, however, was muddled with and spoken of in ethnic terms ('He is a Merina, i.e. he belongs to those who exploit us.'). What the group opposed to the pastor was expressing through their protests was, in other words, disagreement with the continuation of socio-political hierarchies within the church.

Ammerman has suggested that "fundamentalist movements, because of their insistence on singular truth, are likely to establish leadership structures that are strictly hierarchical in form" (Ammerman 1994b: 158). This case study does not confirm such a claim. Although the Adventists in Maroantsetra would agree that there is only one truth, everyone is, in their view, equally entitled and qualified to discover for themselves what that truth might be. Nobody, not even the pastor has any spiritual or moral authority simply because of their position within the church hierarchy. As we have seen throughout this chapter, the Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka are very keen on the equal participation of all within their own church. They are both keen on participation in running the church, and on participation in matters of doctrine and Bible interpretation.

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<sup>28</sup> I believe that the support for the guests from Andapa against the explicit opinion of the pastor had at least partly to do with this.

<sup>29</sup> I use this term here not in a strictly Marxist sense, but to refer to socio-political hierarchies.

## Chapter 5

### From day to day, from week to week

This chapter and the next deal with the *concrete* impact church membership has on people's lives. While the next chapter will focus on the question of how the *social relationships* the Adventists are part of are affected by their membership of the church, in this chapter I want to examine in what ways and to what extent church membership leaves its mark on the life of an *individual*, on a daily basis and beyond. Of course, a person's individual life is not separable from his or her social relationships. For the sake of presentation though, I have disentangled the two.

The central question I attempt to answer in the present chapter is whether being part of the Adventist church is, for its members in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, a loose involvement meaning little other than going to church once a week, or whether Seventh-day Adventism becomes the overriding point of reference within the lives of the people concerned, or something in between. I examine this issue by looking at the presence of Seventh-day Adventist practices within converts' lives, and by trying to understand church members' emotional and mental commitment to these practices.

Of course, there is a lot of variation regarding the influence church membership has on different people's individual lives, depending partly on specific duties within the church, and partly on personal commitment. I cannot do full justice to these differences. What I will describe in this chapter is the place Adventism holds within the life of a 'typical', that is a seriously committed, church member; I will, however, ignore special duties such as the preparation of a sermon.

I will attempt to answer the above question with reference to different time units. In the area of Maroantsetra, the most significant time units are days and weeks as well as the two seasons (wet and 'dry') of the year. For farmers, the agricultural cycle is obviously also an important point of reference. As I will discuss shortly, the different days of the week are an important aspect of the social structure of many Malagasy societies. People in remote places such as Sahameloka do not care about dates and most would not know the year they were born, or indeed find that information particularly relevant or interesting. An account of an event such as the birth of a child would always start with: 'So and so was born on a *Tuesday*', to which might be added that 'it was in the dry season'.

The Seventh-day Adventist agenda, however, follows time units which are significant in the US. And these – as in the case of months, as I will discuss shortly – do not always overlap with time units which are meaningful within the local context. As Malagasy Seventh-day Adventists, my informants are confronted with both.

### **From day to day**

The most obvious impact of commitment to the Adventist church on people lives within the space of just a single day is the practice of repeated prayer. In both my host families, a silent prayer – kneeling down beside one's bed with one's head bent down – was the very first and the very last activity of the day. A prayer was spoken prior to every meal of the day and, in the case of my host family in Sahameloka, also afterwards. Moreover, they also used to say a short prayer before eating any snack, such as a banana while working in the forest, and often even before drinking a sip of water. In both my host families, a prayer was spoken behind closed doors, before someone set out on a special venture – such as a trip to town or a longer journey, a wake, a visit to the hospital or missionising work – asking for spiritual strength, the success of what one was about to undertake, or the safe return of those about to leave<sup>1</sup>. Thus the activity of praying punctuates the day of an Adventist and brings people's religious commitment to awareness at different points throughout it. One might argue, however, that daily prayers are routinised and therefore lose some of their intensity. And indeed, it seemed to me that they were often (but not always!) spoken quickly and with little dedication.

In contrast, daily Bible study typically involved the conscious and concentrated participation of those who engaged in it. Bible study is central to the argument I develop in this thesis and it will be discussed in detail in chapters 9, 10 and 11. At this point I merely want to point out the role Bible study played in my host families' daily routine and time management. Ideally, Seventh-day Adventists world-wide study the Bible at least twice every day – guided by particular study material provided by the church – both in the morning before setting out to work and in the evening after it has been done. Although this ideal could not always be met by either of my host families, they both made an effort to do at least either the shorter Morning Watch (*fiambenana*) or the daily

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<sup>1</sup> Asking for the blessing of one's *ray aman-dreny* (parents, senior kin) or even one's ancestors before taking off on a long journey for example is a common practice all around Madagascar. However, the Adventists ask for God's blessing on many more than such occasions.

lesson in their Bible Study Guide in the evening. Thus Bible study was present as part of their daily routine, but the amount of time dedicated to it could vary considerably from just five minutes to half an hour or more.

Church membership also had an impact on what we would eat, because the Adventists follow the food prohibitions stated in Leviticus chapter 11. Taboos (*fady*) of all kinds, including those relating to consumption, are prevalent throughout Madagascar (van Gennep 1904, Ruud 1960, Lambek 1992a: 246, Cole 2001: 109-113; see also Middleton 1999b). Almost every family I ever met had their specific food *fady* said to have been proclaimed by one of their ancestors<sup>2</sup>. Thus the concept of taboo, which plays a very significant role within Seventh-day Adventist doctrine, was not new to church members, and indeed they refer to Adventist taboos equally as *fady*. What changed was simply what exactly one could eat and what not. Former ancestral food taboos were dropped, and new Adventist ones adopted. In fact, in Sahameloka this had little impact since people there almost exclusively live off rice, leaf broth, bananas and sometimes a chicken, none of which is *fady* for Adventists. The impact on our menu in Maroantsetra was slightly greater, since we were not allowed to eat shrimps and the crustacean, widely sold at the market. Pork is hardly eaten at all in this area of Madagascar, and so the prohibition on eating it did not pose a problem. What was, however, difficult for some church members, at least at first, was to abstain from smoking and from drinking alcohol. Some never managed. Keeping consumption taboos is extremely important in the view of local Adventists – possibly because of the continuity with the indigenous concept of *fady* – and so those who were seen to smoke or to drink were not accepted as ‘proper’ church members. And indeed, not following consumption taboos was often a sign of a person ‘going cold’ (*lasa mangatsiaka*)<sup>3</sup>.

Lambek has suggested that one has to understand taboos “less as facts than as acts” (1992a: 246). He interprets the keeping of a particular taboo as a “performative act in the sense that it brings into being and maintains – embodies – a particular (...) moral state” (1992a: 253). Following Lambek, I would suggest that by abstaining from, in

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<sup>2</sup> In contrast to consumption taboos among the southern Betsimisaraka described by Cole (2001: 109-110), people in Sahameloka did not tend to keep individual *fady*, but entire households would follow the combined *fady* of all household members.

<sup>3</sup> Josephides (1982: 152-153) notes the same pattern among the Adventist Boroi of Papua New Guinea. She also suggests that Adventist consumption taboos put many people off from joining

particular, alcohol, the Adventists make a statement to themselves and to others about who they are and, equally importantly, about who they are not (anymore)<sup>4</sup>. However, drinking alcohol is socially significant mainly during ritual practices such as exhumation which Seventh-day Adventists do not attend anyway. But consumption of alcohol also stops the Adventists from joining New Year's Eve's parties and similar occasions when at least some people are likely to become excessively drunk.

Apart from regular prayer, Bible study and food rules, church members both in town and in the village live, on an average day, as everybody else. The fact that they are Adventists does not influence their activities as rice farmers, civil servants, housewives or sellers at the market; and these activities, after all, take up most of people's time. And during these daily activities, their identity as Adventists does not seem prominent. While living in Sahameloka, I often went to work in the rice fields or in the forest with one or several members of my host family. Never did anybody refer to their land as, say, having been given to them by God; land was always spoken of as family inheritance, and indeed inheritance from one's ancestors. Even though Seventh-day Adventists refuse to take part in ritual practices by which people communicate with their dead kin, notably exhumation and sacrifice, like everyone else they do honour the legacy of their ancestors (I will come back to this point in chapter 8), one aspect of which is to work the land inherited from them (Cole 1997: 411). When Maman' and Papan' i Claude farm their land, what I think is on their mind is both the kinship connections – past and present – which the land represents, and their desire to work as hard as possible, so that they can produce as much rice as possible and perhaps sell some and make money and buy more land for their children.

At the same time, Maman' i Beby or Maman' i Claude might sometimes suddenly pick up and read the Bible while waiting for the rice to cook which shows that their religious commitment is not absent from their minds outside specifically Adventist contexts.

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the church. Chowning (1990: 41), however, describes the practice in another Adventist community in Papua New Guinea as much more lax with regard to taboos.

<sup>4</sup> See Cole (2001: 109-113) on keeping *fady* as a performative act of remembering one's ancestors.



### **From week to week**

The most important of all Adventist *fady* (taboos) is the prohibition to work on the Sabbath. As with consumption taboos, the concept that there are particular days on which one must not work, is prominent throughout Madagascar, including the area of Maroantsetra. There are two kinds of working day taboos. The first one is ancestry-specific (*andro fady*), i.e. a particular ancestry is not allowed to do any work on a particular day of the week, especially on their rice fields, but sometimes in the forest as well. The second is specific to particular pieces of land (*fadin' ny tany*) which must not be worked on, by whoever, on certain days of the week. Transgression of either of these *fady* entails a serious risk of provoking misfortune. Hence keeping the Sabbath does not introduce a new concept. What it changes is the actual day on which it is taboo to work, and church membership, in principle, cancels both types of traditional *fady*. However, for the sake of kin relations, church members in Sahameloka generally stuck to these, emphasising, though, when asked, that they only did so in order not to provoke their kin. I often visited members of the Adventist church on purpose on the *fady* days of the ancestry whose land they were farming, in order to see whether they had gone to work or not. When they had not, they would explain that they were just having a day of rest.

An Adventist week is marked by repeated church services. In the course of a normal week (that is a week without any special events organised by the church), there are three church services Adventists are meant to attend: two evening services on Wednesday and Friday lasting for about an hour, and the Sabbath service which lasts all of Saturday, with a break at lunchtime. All seriously committed church members attend the Sabbath service barring exceptional circumstances. The evening services are less well attended.

### **From month to month**

A month is not a particularly meaningful time unit in the Malagasy context other than in relation to spirit possession (*tromba*). Mediums in the area of Maroantsetra typically call on their various spirits to arrive once a month, at more or less regular intervals, usually around full moon. Since, for the Adventists, calling on spirits to come is equivalent to invoking Satan himself, attending a spirit possession session – not to speak of acting as a medium – are among those practices which are most strictly forbidden to members of the church. But at the time of my fieldwork, only a small minority of people in general were

involved in spirit possession, even in Sahameloka, and so the Adventists' non-participation was of little significance. Indeed, many Protestants disapproved of spirit possession as well.

The Adventist agenda, however, is not made in Madagascar, but in the US where a month is a much more meaningful time unit, and so several Adventist practices are performed on a monthly basis. These include fasting every second Sabbath of the month and attending an all-night church service every fourth. However, both in Maroantsetra and in Sahameloka, the great majority of church members were very lax about these practices, which obviously failed to strike a chord with them. Perhaps this was so because of their timing. The explicit explanations people gave, if asked, emphasised that keeping the fast or staying up all night was physically too tiring. "We don't manage" (*tsy afaka*). However, I was always intrigued at how easily the Malagasy manage to stay up all night, for example as part of the festivities surrounding exhumation. During the six months I lived in Sahameloka, the all-night service never happened at all, and the few who attended it in Maroantsetra often brought pillows along in anticipation of a nap.

Also on a monthly basis, church members are expected to pay tithes, in theory, both of their cash income and of the value of their produce. I do not know whether or not people actually do this, since only the pastor sees the content of the little envelopes provided for this purpose, and he is not allowed to give any information regarding the contributions made. But my impression is that tithing was looked at rather pragmatically. "It's not an obligation, but one ought to do it" (*tsy tsy maintsy, fa tokony*), Papan' i Beby once explained to me, although his family always paid tithes. In Maroantsetra, quite a few people, but by no means all, did hand in their envelopes and thus presumably gave some money, while this was a fairly rare sight in Sahameloka, where obviously produce was not considered income relevant to tithing.

I would like to add a few words about the financial aspect of church membership at this point. Giving money or material to the church is always a voluntary act and thus it would be wholly unjustified to speak of financial exploitation or anything along those lines. At the same time, as I mentioned at the very beginning of this thesis, membership of the Adventist church, at least in my fieldsites, does not result in any material or financial advantages such as free medical care<sup>5</sup>. Thus, potential material benefit would

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<sup>5</sup> Neither does the Seventh-day Adventist church propagate any kind of 'prosperity gospel'.

never stand up as an explanation of the attraction of the church as has sometimes been suggested concerning other contexts (e.g. Ross 1978: 195 , Steley 1990: 124-29, Stoll 1990: 103). The only financial advantage church membership entails are savings in ritual expenses which admittedly can be substantial – the value of a bull, lots of rice and rum for the guests of a sacrifice for example, clothes for the ancestors – a fact lamented by many non-Adventist Antimaroa (people of Maroantsetra)<sup>6</sup>. However, nobody dares not to perform an exhumation for financial reasons – the danger of ancestral wrath would simply be too great. And indeed, people are even willing to sell land if such a ritual seems imminently necessary, but they lack the material resources. Concerning the Adventists, not doing ancestral rituals is not an *attraction* of the Adventist church, but their main *problem* as church members. This they discussed amongst themselves and with me on numerous occasions during which they expressed envy of the situation of Seventh-day Adventists in other countries who, they presume, do not have this problem. Although church members appreciate the savings, the social costs involved – conflict with their kin – by far outweigh the material gain. *If* they could combine being devout Adventists and participating in these rituals, they would do so ever so happily. However, they cannot and that is their main, often discussed problem. How they cope with the potential ancestral wrath they expose themselves to by not performing exhumation and sacrifice, we will see in chapter 7.

### **From year to year**

Several events in the Seventh-day Adventist agenda happen every three months. The most important of these is the communion, which, in Adventist practice world-wide, is followed by a ritual during which the baptised members of the church wash each other's feet in imitation of the Last Supper (this happens in gender-segregated groups). Apart from communion-cum-feet-washing rituals, but often combined with them, there are district meetings every three months which in Maroantsetra attracted several hundred church members mainly from the countryside, and sometimes up to a thousand, so that

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<sup>6</sup> Westermarck (1998: 56, 61-62) suggests a connection between giving up the “old ways” and upward economic mobility among Seventh-day Adventists in Papua New Guinea and generally stresses their concern with economic benefit. Lewellen, however, shows in detail – testing, and rejecting, “a ‘Weberian’ hypothesis” (1979: 246-47) concerning the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism – that financial benefit does not account for conversion to Seventh-day Adventism among a community in Peru (1978, 1979).

the actual service had to be held in the open for lack of space inside the church. For the younger members of the church, such district meetings were often combined with a camp over the weekend, just outside the church, involving both serious Bible study and pathfinder-style activities such as cooking and playing party games. For people from rural places, a district meeting was, at the same time as being a special religious event, an opportunity to go to town, to see relatives there or to visit a doctor or simply to go shopping and wear one's best clothes.

Both of these events – communion-feet-washing rituals and district meetings – create a sense of community among church members. In particular the communion-feet-washing ritual, because only baptised Seventh-day Adventists can take part in it (people who regularly attend church, but who have not yet been baptised are excluded from participation). During this ritual, the baptised church members are indeed a “club of the religiously qualified” (Weber’s definition of a Protestant sect [“Verein der religiös Qualifizierten”; my translation; 1920: 221]). It was only ever during the communion that it was politely suggested to me that, as a non-Adventist, I should sit at the back. After having washed each other’s feet, all church members gathered in a big circle, from which I was likewise excluded (although I was allowed to stand nearby and observe). After several songs and prayers, the circle was dissolved by way of a snake-like movement of the circle moving back on itself, during which everyone shook each other’s hand.

On the one hand, these activities certainly create a sense of being part of an exclusive Adventist community; the fact of my exclusion on these, and only these, occasions, supports this interpretation. On the other hand, it has always been my impression that the sense of community created was very much that of being part of a *global*, rather than a local, community of Seventh-day Adventists, a point to which I will return in the next chapter. I have little evidence to support this suggestion other than my intuition and the lack of any signs of an increased sense of local community except for when standing in the circle. On one occasion, Maman’ i Beby told me prior to a feet-washing ritual that she was disinclined to wash a certain woman’s feet since she had suspicions about that woman being involved in some kind of witchcraft despite her

membership of the Adventist church. At least that particular woman was not part of the Adventist community Maman' i Beby envisaged<sup>7</sup>.

Once or twice in the course of a year, there was a week with special events held in the evenings in church. These weeks were mainly aimed at instruction in different issues relevant to Seventh-day Adventists and were led by visiting members of the church, mostly an Adventist pastor or a pastor's wife from Madagascar's capital. The daily meetings were held very much in the style of lectures or school instruction, typically on issues concerning health. Participation in these events was completely voluntary, but they were very well attended on the whole, and lots of people bothered to take notes of the information given and to copy drawings off the blackboard. Similarly, once or twice a year, there were special church services, held every evening of a week, intended to heighten the members' spiritual awareness and their preparation for Christ's return. These were less well attended.

In sum: in addition to daily and weekly practices, the Adventist year is punctuated by regular special events throughout. However, thinking about the time space of a year, it is at least as important to note what church members abstain from. First and foremost, as we have seen, Seventh-day Adventists do not attend ritual practices which involve communication with the dead. Because these are not distributed equally throughout the year, but usually take place in the course of a four-month period (December-March), the tensions aroused by the Adventists' non-participation come to the fore during that period. During the rest of the year these tensions are not absent; they are however muted.

Seventh-day Adventists also do not celebrate any of the traditional Christian festivities (Christmas, Easter, Pentecost) for reasons I discussed in the last chapter. And on New Year's Eve they go separate ways and have their own festivities partly because, according to Adventist doctrine, the year ends at sunset rather than at midnight, but mainly because the Adventists disapprove of the heavy drinking involved in Malagasy turn-of-the-year parties. However, neither Christmas nor New Year's Eve are about establishing or confirming social relations and so the fact that they go their separate ways

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<sup>7</sup> One could perhaps object that having a sense of an Adventist community does not imply that every single member of the church must be included, and that Maman' i Beby had good reasons to exclude that particular woman. However, the kinship rhetoric of the Adventist church does not allow for such exclusion on the part of individual members.

does not cause anybody to take offence. Consumption of alcohol is also part of the reason why Adventist women form a separate group during the activities of 8<sup>th</sup> March, a day which enjoys surprising popularity in Madagascar, although the interpretation of what it is about departs significantly from the European blueprint.

In the course of a year, people are likely to fall ill once or twice. While most local people make use of both traditional sources of healing and biomedicine available at the pharmacy in town, members of the Adventist church never consult traditional healers – “people who know things” (*ôlo mahay raha*) – because they have learnt, through the teachings of the church, that traditional healing practices are the work of the devil. This aspect of Adventist practice makes it particularly clear that being a Seventh-day Adventist is not just a matter of going to a different church on a different day, but a lifestyle in itself, since church membership has an influence on one’s life far beyond strictly religious matters.

### **In a lifetime ...**

The Seventh-day Adventists in my fieldsites distinguish between *intéressés* – people interested in Adventism – and *membres*. Although an ‘interested person’ may in fact be more committed than a member, the dividing line between them is baptism by full immersion into water. Because baptism, so I was told by several church members, has to be the result of a conscious and properly thought-through decision by the person concerned, Seventh-day Adventists only practise adult baptism, which in Madagascar means people at least fourteen years old<sup>8</sup>. Also, children are without sin and thus there is no need for them to be ritually cleansed through baptism.

*Intéressés* can participate in Bible study and other activities in church, but only baptised members are allowed to take on duties and offices and to play a leading role during church services. However, the church members in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka do not think that baptism is *automatically* a ticket to Heaven; nor do they think that not being baptised, or not being an Adventist for that matter, necessarily closes the door to Paradise. What will matter in the end is a person’s spiritual condition and only God

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<sup>8</sup> In my fieldsites, many people do not know how old they are. The birth of a child is not usually remembered with reference to a year, but to particular events (‘she was born when we drained the lake’) or other people’s life stages (‘he was born when his brother could already walk’). Thus baptism is often based on an estimation of someone’s age. In any case, the globally relevant Church Manual does not fix any particular age.

knows someone's heart. This also shows that the Adventists do not consider themselves an exclusive community chosen by God, although one's own baptism does mark one's inclusion in a global community of Adventists. I think what baptism expresses and means to church members in my fieldsites is the 'point of no return' at the end of a sometimes lengthy process of deciding whether to join the church. As such, baptism is as much a statement to oneself as it is a public marker of one's identity. It was not by chance that mass baptisms in Maroantsetra took place in the sea rather than inside the church, preceded by a march through the centre of town. To get baptised is to publicly announce: 'I have made up my mind', although of course this does not exclude the possibility of people 'going cold' later.

However, once someone has been baptised as a Seventh-day Adventist, this cannot be undone except in extremely serious circumstances<sup>9</sup>. But – because for people involved in a sexual relationship, civil marriage is a prerequisite for baptism<sup>10</sup> – sanctions may be imposed by the church committee on a baptised member who enters a sexual relationship but fails to legalise it.

Church membership also has a strong influence on people's choice of spouses. Except for monogamy, the Adventist church does not stipulate any rules as to whom a Seventh-day Adventist ought to marry or not to marry. Although the Church Manual strongly discourages people from marrying a non-Adventist spouse, in the area of Maroantsetra it is perfectly acceptable for a Seventh-day Adventist to be married to, or to marry, someone not belonging to the church, as long as their relationship is legally recognised<sup>11</sup>. But marriage between church members was thought the ideal by my informants, not only because of aspired spiritual harmony between the two spouses, but also because of pragmatic problems – such as the religious education of their children – which may arise from only one of them belonging to the Adventist church. In the majority of cases in the area of Maroantsetra, entire nuclear families converted to Seventh-day Adventism at more or less the same time, and so there was no problem.

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<sup>9</sup> I only ever heard of one such case in the entire district of Maroantsetra which concerned a man who had stolen money from the church. However, he was later baptised again for a second time.

<sup>10</sup> The Adventist church has its own wedding ceremony which, however, I have never seen partly because at least in Madagascar, it is supposed to be performed only if the groom and bride are virgins.

<sup>11</sup> At the same time, it is my impression that for church members in Maroantsetra and especially in Sahameloka, civil marriage is not a particularly meaningful institution, but a duty they perform because the church demands it.

There were, however, a few church members I knew whose spouses had a different church affiliation or none at all. In some cases, this did become a problem; in others not. One of the most committed and active members of the Adventist church in Maroantsetra town, for example, was a man married to a woman who was an equally committed member of Jehovah's Witnesses. They had four young children and I understand there was a certain degree of quarrelling between the two about who was going to take the children to church. But as far as one can know, they seemed to live quite happily with their different church affiliations, which obviously did not do any harm to their respective religious commitment.

Ideally, the future spouse of a young Adventist starting to make plans to get married is another church member, or at least someone not disinclined towards becoming one. However, as for everyone else in the area, local rules of exogamy are imperative and more important than church affiliation. Thus intra-Adventist marriage does not, as such, pose a threat to traditional kinship structures. Nor does it have any great impact on marriage patterns, at least not in the short run<sup>12</sup>.

In the long run it might, though this is pure speculation as Seventh-day Adventism is a recent phenomenon in the district of Maroantsetra and it is far too early to assess any such influence. A young Adventist man may have to venture further away from his village than his Catholic friend in order to find a bride who is both not related to him and a member of the Adventist church. Thus, in the long run, the kinship ties of Seventh-day Adventists may, geographically speaking, start to branch out further than those of other people. And this may, in turn, have further implications, on rural-urban relations for instance. Moreover, in future, church members may become increasingly separated from other people and interlinked through kinship ties as a result of intra-Adventist marriages. However, many more factors than numbers alone – for example a possible concentration of church members within particular ancestries, the impact of district meetings which bring young people from far-flung places together, or the number of children of Adventist couples – will play a role in shaping the future of Adventist marriage patterns.

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<sup>12</sup> Also, the church demanding of its members to be legally married does not substitute, but supplements, traditional marriage ceremonies (*orimbato*).



### **... and after death**

Membership of the Adventist church also has implications for one's life after death. As I have explained, Seventh-day Adventists disapprove of the local practices of exhumation and cattle sacrifice. But not only do they not *attend* these rituals, they neither want to *be* exhumed once they are dead, nor do they wish to be offered a cow or bull in sacrifice. This attitude, however, poses a serious problem for their non-Adventist kin. How the two sides deal with conflicting ideas about what ought to happen to the dead is discussed in chapter 8.

### **Decision-making processes**

I have in this chapter referred to numerous *decisions* the Adventists have to make concerning their lives on a daily basis and beyond, and how these are influenced by their belonging to the Adventist church. The kind of decisions I have discussed so far, however, concern situations and problems on which the church takes a clear and explicit view, so that the outcome of people's decision-making processes concerning such situations and problems is more or less predetermined, although on an *individual* basis people certainly go through a process by which they come to accept the specifically Adventist standpoint on a specific issue. What I have neglected in my presentation so far are those situations for which there is no ready-made Adventist answer. The rest of this chapter examines decision-making processes on which the Adventists embark in such situations. To illustrate the point, I have chosen one example from my host family in Sahameloka.

Papan' and Maman' i Claude had a piece of semi-cleared forest a long way from Sahameloka, which they thought of as a kind of reserve for when their land close to the village might have become scarce due to its division amongst kin. The piece of land next to theirs was owned by a man who had cleared the forest, built a proper house and lived there for years by himself. One morning, he turned up at our house in Sahameloka and offered his piece of already nicely cleared forest land to Maman' and Papan' i Claude for sale. The reason why he wanted to move away was because the land had turned out to be 'powerful' (*mahery*). Land said to be powerful is thought to be controlled by a supernatural force called *tsiny* which is responsible for misfortune and bad luck afflicting

the people living on it<sup>13</sup>. The present owner of the land in question complained about constant illness. Since there is nothing one can do about 'powerful' land other than to leave, he wanted to move away, but understandably he preferred to sell the land rather than let it lie fallow. He approached my host family for two reasons. He assumed that they might have an interest since his land joined up with, and had many advantages over, theirs. He also knew that nobody would buy reportedly 'powerful' land except for, possibly, Adventists, who, he knew, thought themselves protected from such forces by God. The offer was indeed very attractive for Papan' and Maman' i Claude. But at the same time, they felt extremely uncertain as to whether they could dare to buy *tany mahery* (powerful land). They knew of another piece of land which had had a negative effect on three different families who lived there in succession, but on which a fourth, a *Seventh-day Adventist*, family had since lived without encountering any problems. Yet they were also clearly afraid. After a few days considering and discussing the issue, they decided to buy the land. But it was a difficult decision and clearly a risk. If they used it without being struck by sudden misfortune, they would keep it; if it turned out still to be 'powerful', they would attempt to sell it, possibly to migrants who are thought to be less vulnerable to attacks by local *tsiny*. Maman' and Papan' i Claude by no means dismissed the possibility of land being *mahery*. But they hoped that God would protect them from the force of the land if they accepted this test of courage. However, so they repeatedly told themselves, they would have to be especially vigilant for Bible study and they would have to start keeping the monthly day of fast, in order to secure God's protection. In the end, they never actually bought the land, because it turned out to be too expensive, while they had hoped it would be cheap because of it being 'powerful'.

The example illustrates well how commitment to the Adventist church has an influence on people's life far beyond matters directly related to the church. At the same time, it shows that traditional concepts often remain meaningful to members of the Adventist church. The decision-making-process visible in the above example is typical of the overall situation of the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, which is characterised by a constant negotiation between commitment to Adventist practice and thought, on the one hand, and life in a non-Adventist society, on the other.

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<sup>13</sup> Cole notes a similar, if not identical, concept among her southern Betsimisaraka informants

## Conclusion

How can we answer, then, the question whether church membership in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka is but a loose, or an overriding commitment, or something in between? Much of what the Seventh-day Adventists do in life is not affected by their membership of the church. Maman' and Papan' i Beby's life as town dwellers is not as such changed by the fact that they are Adventists; neither is Papan' and Maman' i Claude's as rice farmers. Growing up, going to school, getting married and starting one's own household, having children ... the Adventists go through life much as everybody else. However, being Seventh-day Adventist has a certain influence on daily life, in the course of every week, and year, and even after death. At the same time, though, it is not the only commitment people have and Adventism is not their only and, in all situations, dominant mode of life. By joining the Adventist church, people embark on a serious commitment which involves much more than simply attending church on a different day of the week. But Adventism does *not* override everything else. The Adventists' daily lives are shaped *both* by Adventist values and activities, and those of the society they grew up and live in. Neither is clearly dominant or pushing the other completely to the side. It is the constant negotiation this situation produces which I go on to discuss in the next chapter.

## Chapter 6

### Social relations

#### Living within the wider society

In September of 1999, a fire swept through a town in northern Madagascar where sapphires had recently been found and which therefore attracted large numbers of migrants from different parts of Madagascar intent to try their luck digging the soil. Some of these migrants were members of a New Christian Group called Jesus Saves Mamonjy (Jesus Saves). As the fire ravaged through the town and destroyed people's houses, Jesus Saves converts ran to their new hall and prayed that it be spared from the flames. They made no effort to help their neighbours to extinguish it. Moreover, to the anger and distress of the local population, they had built this new meeting hall on the eastern side of the town's lake totally disregarding the fact that it was strictly *fady* (taboo) to construct any building there. Such inconsiderate behaviour, as Walsh tells us in his account of these events (Walsh forthcoming), was shocking to the town's inhabitants and created a deep gulf between Jesus Saves Christians and the local population. Had the Seventh-day Adventists in the district of Maroantsetra heard of the migrants' conduct, they would have been equally shocked. For their attitude is completely different.

This chapter explores the impact of membership of the Adventist church on the social relations the Seventh-day Adventists are involved in. In this first section I want to illustrate that in complete contrast to the aggressive behaviour of Jesus Saves members in the context described by Walsh, the Adventists both in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka make every effort to blend in with their social environment, and that they do their best not to offend anybody, if at all possible, while being truthful to the requirements of the church<sup>1</sup>. While this first section looks at how Seventh-day Adventists live within the wider society in general, the second section of this chapter examines the issue of kinship

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<sup>1</sup> In his analysis of their aggressive behaviour, Walsh focusses on the salvationist *ethos* of Jesus Saves Christians. My hunch, however, is that their conduct had a lot to do with the fact that

and in this light discusses the relationship of unrelated church members, on the one hand, and relations between Adventist and non-Adventist kin, on the other.

In contrast to the situation in many other contexts (see Nyaundi 1997: 251, Chowning 1990: 38, Ross 1978: 196), the Seventh-day Adventists both in Maroantsetra town and in any of the district's villages do not live spatially segregated, but continue to live within established settlement patterns after their conversion to Adventism. I have never heard of any Adventist family even making an attempt to do otherwise<sup>2</sup>. In Sahameloka, as in other villages, church members continue to live with, or close to, their non-Adventist kin. In town, as I discussed earlier, the settlement pattern is less clearly kin based. Some of the direct neighbours of my host family in Maroantsetra were Protestants, some were Pentecostals and some were not affiliated with any church at all. All of these people shared one water well and passed each others' houses on numerous occasions throughout the day, as when going to the market. When Maman' i Beby needed some washing powder or soap, she called on our neighbours' little girl, sending her off to buy what she needed and rewarding her with a slice of pineapple and, sometimes, a little money. When our lemur, whom we illegally kept as a pet, got caught high up in the litchi tree (he was attached to a string), we called the young lad from next door to climb up the tree and get the terrified animal down. Similarly, our neighbours in Sahameloka borrowed tools from us and used our washing line.

The children in both my host families had Adventist and non-Adventist friends alike. It was a non-Adventist girl who regularly came to pick up Beby on her way to school and who often plaited her hair. Kiki often played cards with his mates from school on our veranda. And the younger boys of my host family in Sahameloka played with their neighbours' kids. Papan' i Beby's relationship with his work colleagues was not clouded by the fact that he was the only one who was ever seen working on a Sunday, but never on Saturdays. During our daily trip to the market, Maman' i Beby kept stopping and chatting to people who had nothing to do with the Adventist church, and she spent many an afternoon visiting a neighbour or someone else she knew in hospital.

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these people were migrants and complete strangers to the place and the people they offended so badly. In this respect, the situation I describe is completely different.

<sup>2</sup> I only know of two cases, one in Maroantsetra town and one in Sahameloka, where members of the Adventist church were disinherited and consequently had to rent a house.

Not only are church members friendly to, and with, other people, but they make an extra effort to fulfil their social roles and duties as neighbours and co-residents and villagers. In contrast to exhumations and sacrifices, during which people ritually invoke their ancestors, wakes and funerals in this part of Madagascar do not involve the invocation of, or communication with, ancestors, at least not in a ritual sense. Therefore, these are the only post-mortem practices Seventh-day Adventists can and do attend. Arguably, the members of the Adventist church in fact *construe* such spaces as wakes and funerals as being free of any relationship to ancestors, in order to be able to attend. Indeed, they are very careful to do *at least* their expected share participating in wakes and funerals of close and distant neighbours, friends and acquaintances, work colleagues and others. In fact, it has always been my impression that they were extra alert not to neglect their social obligations in this respect thereby sending out a message that their non-participation in exhumation and cattle sacrifice was not intended to disrupt social relations.

Unfortunately – from the Adventist point of view – Protestant and Catholic weddings in Sahameloka almost always take place on a Saturday. Because of the prohibition to do any kind of work other than what is absolutely necessary during the Sabbath, Adventist kin cannot help with cooking or any other preparations. However, they – as well as many Adventists not closely related to the groom or bride – would always make a point of contributing money and attending the wedding meal at lunchtime between the first and second part of the Sabbath church service. On one occasion I witnessed, moreover, the morning part of the Sabbath service of the Adventist church in Sahameloka ended early and the afternoon part started late, so as to enable church members to attend the wedding which took place that day.

On another occasion in Sahameloka, a young boy had not returned home by the time it got dark. As he had still not been found by about nine o'clock, by which time most villagers were in bed, the *anjoma* – a large sea shell used by the village president for the purpose of attracting people's attention – was blown. Everyone immediately came out of doors to see what was up. As people learnt what had happened, a troop of young men was formed who then – equipped with my powerful torch – set out to find the lost child. They succeeded and came back into the village an hour or so later, carrying the little boy on their shoulders like a hero, singing songs of joy and union which

everyone still up joined in. It went without saying that the village's Adventists participated in the search as everyone else.

It is also worth mentioning that other studies of Seventh-day Adventism convey an extremely varied picture concerning the social integration, and segregation, respectively, of Adventists around the world. While some studies, as already mentioned, speak of the spatial segregation of Seventh-day Adventists (Ross 1978: 196, Chowning 1990: 38, Nyaundi 1997: 251) which, I assume, implies at least a certain degree of social segregation as well, Westermarck (1987: 117) emphasises that "church members [among the Agarabi of Papua New Guinea] do not live in isolation from non-Christians or the members of other churches" (1987: 117). Lewellen's work on Adventists in Peru in the 1970s (1978, 1979) suggests a similar pattern, while Josephides' account (1982) concerns a context in which almost the entire community has converted to Seventh-day Adventism, thus reducing the potential of social isolation.

## Negotiating Kinship

We have seen that membership of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka has little impact on the daily relations church members entertain with neighbours, friends and other people with whom they interact. In this section, I want to examine the impact of church membership on two kinds of relations: on the relations among *havana*, a term used to refer to all one's kin on both one's mother's and one's father's side, on the one hand, and on the relations among fellow Adventists, on the other. The term church members use to express their relationship as fellow Seventh-day Adventists is *mpiara-mivavaka*, which literally means 'people who pray together' or 'people who go to the same church'.

The two principal questions I attempt to tackle and to answer in the present section are, first, whether or not, and if so to what extent, membership of the Adventist church results in the ties between Adventist and non-Adventist kin being loosened or, perhaps, even entirely lost; and second, whether or not, and if so to what extent, *mpiara-mivavaka* become like kin.

These questions are relevant for two reasons. The first reason is that the global Seventh-day Adventist church embraces and advocates an ideology of equality of all

humankind and of kinship among church members. Regardless of one's particular kin relations, ethnic origin and nationality, skin colour or any other features which otherwise serve to divide people into distinctive groups, baptised Seventh-day Adventists are meant to be and to behave like 'one big family', that is to act with mutual love and in mutual support of each other. Also recall the distinctive sense of community evoked during the footwashing ritual I briefly described in the last chapter.

The second reason is that, as we have seen, acting in accordance with Adventist principles – that is not attending exhumation and sacrifice – leads to conflict with one's non-Adventist kin. Although this chapter is concerned with how *living* kin relate to each other, it is important to keep in mind that their relationship is dependent on their diverging relationship to their ancestors. Kin relations among the living can be seriously damaged by the Adventists' refusal to relate to their dead kin. The case of Maman' i Claude's family and that of her husband's provide useful examples to illustrate the continuum of possibilities of how exactly the relationship among living kin can be affected by the Adventists' non-participation in ancestral rituals.

Maman' i Claude is one of four siblings. Two of these, herself and one of her brothers, are members of the Seventh-day Adventist church. Her three siblings live close to their father in her natal village, an hour's walk away from Sahameloka. Maman' i Claude's father understood, and to a certain extent accepted, that his daughter had joined the Adventist church as a response to Claude's recovery (see conversion stories in chapter 3: 94), but he strongly objected to her still being in the church, now that Claude was fine. The thought that two of his four children would not care for him (*tsy mikarakara*) once he was dead and that they would let his bones rot in the coffin was – I felt when talking to him and to his Adventist children – both personally painful and unacceptable to him. However, he often came to our house to visit his daughter and her family, and never did I observe any sign of *open* conflict between them. On the contrary, both sides made an effort to respect each other's concerns and feelings. When he ate with us, Maman' i Claude's father always waited till the others had finished their prayer, though he had never in his life belonged to any church. Even when we went to see him in his house, he would allow us time for prayer prior to a meal, which Maman' i Claude then spoke quietly and quickly. Maman' i Claude, on her part, made sure that she always visited her father and all her siblings when in her natal village and shared at least a few bites of rice with them. She kept quiet about her church affiliation during these visits and



never made the slightest attempt to preach to anybody. Their mutual conciliatory attitude was clearly a way of signalling to each other that, despite their disagreement over ancestral rituals, they were, nevertheless, kin. However, at the same time, there was a certain, if muted, tension in the air.

Papan' i Claude is in an entirely different situation. When he became an Adventist, his mother had long been dead and 'the work' for her had been completed (*vita ny asa*), meaning that she had both been exhumed and that the family had killed a bull for her. His father, however, died a couple of years after he had joined the Adventist church and the exhumation was due some years later. Being the eldest son, Papan' i Claude would have been the one responsible for the timing and organisation of the exhumation of his father, but he refused to have any part in it. When Maman' i Claude told me this story, we were in the middle of a rice field with no-one else around for literally miles. Nevertheless, she whispered as she told me what happened:

'All of Papan' i Claude's kin gathered in the house next to ours where the meal after the exhumation was going to take place. Knowing that Papan' i Claude refused either to organise, or to attend, his father's exhumation, all the elders of his ancestry [*ny ôlo maveny jiaby*] came to our house, and they took off their hats – at this point her voice was almost inaudible – and begged Papan' i Claude to, at least, eat with them if he could not come to the tombs. 'This is your father', they said to him. Papan' i Claude, however, refused and stayed put inside our house. I know', Maman' i Claude continued, 'I would never have been able to remain firm with all the elders begging us to join them in this way, and so I left and went to Maroantsetra for a couple of days till everything was over. Ever since that time, we are never even invited to any exhumation and when Papan' i Claude was very ill some time ago, none of his kin turned up for a visit.'

Clearly, from the point of view of his non-Adventist kin, he had gone too far. Not only was his dismissal of the elders' plea a terrible offence, but it amounted to a refusal of kinship, since it is partly – among Betsimisaraka as among other Malagasy populations – by reference to one's common ancestors that kinship among the living is constituted and reconfirmed (Bloch 1985, Cole 2001: 157-158). During the six months

that I lived with Papan' i Claude and his family, none of his many kin who lived in Sahameloka ever turned up at our house.

The impact of Adventist (non)-practice on kin relations varies from case to case, depending on a number of aspects such as one's position within one's ancestry. Papan' i Claude's case, for example, was certainly made worse by the fact that he was the eldest son of his father. Whatever the exact extent of conflict though, a certain tension – which is highlighted when a particular ritual is actually at issue – is present and strains kin relations in almost all cases. Does this therefore mean that the relationship between Adventist and non-Adventist kin is loosened or lost? And could it possibly be that *mpiara-mivavaka* (fellow Adventists) are becoming a substitute for lost kin? In order to answer these questions, we must take a number of issues into account. One of these is the use of kinship terms.

In defence of Fortes' view that kinship is intrinsically moral, Bloch (1973) has discussed how, among the Merina of highland Madagascar, being kin (*havana*) implies unconditional, long-term reciprocity, security and support. This is also true in the area of Maroantsetra, as elsewhere in Madagascar. Kin are people one has the right to rely on by virtue of being kin. If someone falls ill in Maroantsetra or Sahameloka, it is kin who care for her or him, who pay for expenses, who bring food to the hospital and clean the patient's body. If somebody needs financial support or a place to stay, it is kin one approaches for help. Acting as kin is not a matter of *choice*, but a matter of course. It is not a voluntary, but a compulsory commitment which one cannot shed in all but the most unusual circumstances. In other words, kin are connected, but also stuck with each other, by the very fact that they are kin. Although in reality kin quarrel quite a lot and there is a fair amount of conflict among them, the ideal, at least, is mutual, unconditional support.

Like other Betsimisaraka (see Cole 2001: 71), people in Maroantsetra reckon kinship through both their father's and their mother's lines, 'as far back as anybody can remember', people say, and they refer to all of these people as their *havana* (kin). However, neither the term *havana*, nor specific kin terms are limited to actual kin. People in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka call many people their child, or uncle, on the grounds of friendship or the attempt to create such. Almost anyone, except for a complete stranger, can be called by such terms and their usage does not imply the kind of reciprocal, supportive relationship ideally characteristic of kin.

Following the Adventist ideology of equality and kinship among church members mentioned above, the members of the Adventist church in English-speaking countries refer to each other as ‘brothers and sisters’. The equivalent Malagasy terms (*rahalahy*, *rahavavy*, *anadahy*, *anabavy*<sup>3</sup>), however, mean both brother/sister and cousin of any degree. Thus terms of address employed among Malagasy Seventh-day Adventists express a much broader concept based on generation than that of the English brother/sister. Moreover, as is the case with other kinship terms, these terms are used to refer to almost anybody with whom one has some kind of social relationship (Feeley-Harnik 1991: 203, 265). In other words: the fact that church members in Sahameloka and Maroantsetra *address* each other as kin, means – with regard to their practical relationship – rather little. But what about their actions?

The clearest indicator of who considers whom as kin is marriage. Again as other Betsimisaraka, and many other Malagasy peoples, but not all, the Antimaroa (people from the area of Maroantsetra) follow strongly exogamous marriage rules. The exogamy rule is not clearly defined, yet simple: as long as anybody alive knows, or suspects, that a potential couple is related, either through their mothers’ or their fathers’ lines, they are considered *havana* (kin) and as such cannot marry each other. Young men in search of brides consult elders for the purpose of making sure they do not marry one of their kin out of ignorance. As I explained in chapter 5, members of the Adventist church often and ideally marry each other. Thus, in the context of my fieldsites, this clearly indicates that they do not consider each other as kin. And indeed, despite the usage of specific kin terms such as *rahalahy* (brother/cousin) or *tantine* (paternal aunt) among them, *mpiaramivavaka* never refer to each other as *havana* (kin), except, sometimes, as ‘kin before God’ (*havana amin’ ny Andriamanitra*).

In his first ethnography on the Merina of highland Madagascar, and in the above mentioned article, Bloch distinguishes between genealogical kin, *havana*, and what he calls “artificial kinsmen” (1994a [1971]: 101; 1973: 78), *havana mpifankatia*, which one might translate as ‘kin on the basis of mutual love’. These are people, who although not kin to each other by descent or marriage, have *chosen* to enter into a kin like relationship. However, *havana mpifankatia* are not exactly the same as kin (1994a

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<sup>3</sup> *Raha* indicates that the people concerned are of the same sex, while *ana* indicates the opposite (*rahalahy*=brother(s) of a male person, *anadahy*=brother(s) of a female person, *rahavavy*=sister(s) of a female person, *anabavy*=sister(s) of a male person).

[1971]: 100, 145, 201). The main difference, which Bloch elaborates in his article (1973), is that 'real', genealogical kin are involved in a moral relationship of long-term reciprocity which does not depend on the continual reaffirmation of one's connection as kin. The relationship of 'artificial kin', in contrast, is much more about short-term cooperation – for the purpose of performing agricultural tasks for example – and needs to be continuously kept warm, as it were, lest it should cease.

People in the area of Maroantsetra have a somewhat similar concept of having a set of kin that one chooses, although this seems much less prominent than among the Merina, and there are many significant differences between these two contexts. Such 'artificial kin' – called 'people one makes into kin' (*ôlo atao havana*) in the area of Maroantsetra – are just like proper *havana*, so people told me, apart from the fact that they are buried with their 'real' kin. But I have very little ethnographic data about such relations. However, among the Merina, who in contrast to the Betsimisaraka, form strongly endogamous groups, *havana mpifankatia* ('artificial' kin) marry each other, which is a confirmation that their relationship is indeed one of kinship and, at the same time, has the effect of turning 'artificial kin' into real *havana*, from the next generation onwards. As we have seen, members of the Adventist church also marry each other, but since they act within a strongly exogamous system, intra-Adventist marriages would seem to imply an expression of the fact that they are not even 'artificial kin'.

But although marital practice makes it clear that *mpiara-mivavaka* do not consider each other as kin of any kind, they have taken on board the Adventist ethos of reciprocal love and support among *mpiara-mivavaka*, almost as if they were kin. And, indeed, the members of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka describe their relationship with each other using exactly the same word as that for 'artificial kin' among the Merina: *mpifankatia* and related forms. 'No, we are not *havana*', they would respond to my questions, 'our relationship is one of reciprocal love (*fifankatiavana*); kin (*havana*) often fight and argue, but *mpiara-mivavaka* (church members) all love each other (*mifankatia sintry jiaby*)'. Such statements struck me as being of a rather rhetorical nature not least because what I observed was not all just love and support among *mpiara-mivavaka*. The conflict I mentioned in chapter 4 between the pastor in Maroantsetra and a group of church members was one example. At the same time though, the notion that *mpiara-mivavaka* ought to love and support each other, almost like kin, was not just empty rhetoric. This became particularly clear when church

members did *not* act in support of each other, for which they were then strongly criticised by others. In other words, although I think one has to take the affirmative statement ‘*mpiara-mivavaka* all love each other’ with a pinch of salt, there was clearly an *expectation* that *mpiara-mivavaka* ought to act a bit like kin. It is also interesting to note, in this context, that in rare cases, the Adventist congregation is publically represented as a separate ancestry. This I observed on one occasion in Sahameloka when, during the festivities accompanying a Protestant wedding, the contributions (money, rice) of all the ancestries of the village were publicly announced. Those of the Adventists were listed separately.

I am aware that my discussion of the social relations among *mpiara-mivavaka* is somewhat unclear, but it is so in real life. The following case studies – referring to relations among *mpiara-mivavaka* as well as between Adventist and non-Adventist kin – might shed more light on the issue. As a prelude, consider the following anecdote.

One morning with my host family in Sahameloka, we were reading the daily Morning Watch (a short passage from the Bible which serves as a kind of motto of the day). This morning it read: “If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14: 26)<sup>4</sup>. Consternation all around. “That is not clear to me” (*tsy mazava amin’ nahy*), Maman’ i Claude finally said, an expression which is often used to express disagreement or disapproval.

‘You know’, she continued after a moment’s reflection, ‘the Bible is like a forest: there are all kinds of trees and plants in a forest. There are many, many [*tena maro be*] good trees in a forest, but there are also many [*maro be*] which are not all that good. And so it is with the Bible. Most of what is written in the Bible is good and true, but there are some verses which are not all that good [*misy tsy dia tsara loatra*]. It is just like with a forest. One has to choose [*misafidy*] the good ones.’

The passage in question was certainly weed in her eyes, which is not surprising when we remember that we are dealing with a society where kinship is a crucial

principle of social organisation<sup>5</sup>. And indeed, kinship ties continue to play a very crucial role within the lives of the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka. The following example is a strong case in point.

At the time of my fieldwork, Maman' and Papan' i Beby had lived in Maroantsetra for eighteen years. Kiki and Beby were born there and had never lived anywhere else. As I mentioned earlier, the family has no kin in Maroantsetra, either on his or her side. Because of the absence of kin in town, or anywhere close, most of the family's social contacts are with other members of the Adventist church. However, in the course of the past years, they have, from their point of view, experienced many disappointments regarding these contacts.

While I lived with the family, Kiki was in his pre-final year at school approaching his *baccalaureat*, which would then enable him to study at a university. However, there was a shortage of teachers at his school so that certain subjects such as English, which were on the curriculum for the exams, were simply not taught. Therefore, Kiki's parents, who place great value on the formal education of their children, decided to send him to the capital of the province, Toamasina, which is very close to where they originally come from and where many of both Maman' and Papan' i Beby's kin live. However, none of their kin are Adventists. Having decided to send Kiki back home (*mody*) for the final year of his secondary education, the question arose as to where exactly they should send him to stay. Following Betsimisaraka kinship rules, the proper place for Kiki to stay would have been with Papan' i Beby's younger brother who, being Kiki's *Papa hely* (junior father), is considered responsible for Kiki just as if he was his biological son. However, Papan' i Beby's brother is away from home for most of the year due to his job on a French ship which takes him to far-away places. Theoretically, Kiki could have stayed with the wife of his *Papa hely* who lives in Toamasina throughout the year. Unfortunately though, from the point of view of Kiki's parents, her

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<sup>4</sup> "Raha misy manaraka Ahy ka tsy mankahala ny rainy sy ny reniny sy ny vadiny sy ny zanany sy ny rahalahiny sy ny anabaviny, eny, ary ny ainy koa aza, dia tsy azo ekena ho mpianatro izy."

<sup>5</sup> Kee has pointed out that the demand to break with one's family if one wanted to follow Jesus was made from the very beginning of Christianity (1993: 53).

The symbolism of baptism has been interpreted as replacing one's genealogical kin with a new set of kin sanctified by God (Bloch and Guggenheim 1981). However, I do not think that the members of the Adventist church in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka attribute such symbolism to the ritual of baptism.

lifestyle is rather dubious: she drinks, she smokes and she is said to have several lovers whom she takes home when her husband is away. In short, she does not exactly provide the perfect environment for a young Adventist. Therefore, in order to avoid possible bad influences on the boy, Kiki was sent to stay with Maman' i Beby's brother who, despite not being an Adventist, leads a kind of life style acceptable to Kiki's parents. By taking that decision, they skipped not only Papan' i Beby's younger brother, but also another of his close relatives in town – the son of his elder sister – who, in their particular family constellation, is second in line after Papan' i Beby's brother in his responsibility to care for Kiki. Papan' i Beby's nephew promptly complained about Kiki not staying with him. Kiki's parents had not chosen to send their son to stay with him while studying because he, too, consumes, as I was told, quite a lot of alcohol, while Maman' i Beby's brother with whom Kiki was sent to stay, only drinks at parties. A short while after Kiki's arrival in Toamasina, it was finally decided that he would stay principally with Maman' i Beby's brother as planned, but that he would spend the weekends with Papan' i Beby's nephew who had complained about Kiki not staying at his house.

I have summarised a process of decision-making which took several months to mature during which Maman' and Papan' i Beby discussed the problem as to with whom Kiki was to stay with over and over again. Among all his relatives, there was no really suitable place for him from their point of view; the solution they found was clearly a compromise. At no point, however, was the possibility of sending Kiki to some *unrelated Adventist* family even considered, despite the difficulty in finding an appropriate home for Kiki among their kin. Given this situation and taking into account the family's strong involvement in, and commitment to, the church for eighteen years at that point, one would have expected the possibility of sending him to stay with other Adventists to be, at least, considered. However, it was not.

I have retold Kiki's case in detail, because it demonstrates very clearly that relations between Adventist and non-Adventist kin remain dominant despite the strain put on them by the Adventists breaking away from ritual practices which constitute kinship. What this example illustrates is exactly the unconditional, long-term reciprocity typical of the relationship between kin (Bloch 1973). In my account of Kiki moving to Toamasina, I have left one detail unmentioned, namely the fact that Kiki's parents never even bothered to inform their relatives of Kiki's arrival, let alone to ask them whether he could come and stay. I repeatedly asked Maman' and Papan' i Beby whether they had

written at all to their relatives in Toamasina. 'No, that is not necessary, we are family' (*fianakaviana*), they replied. And so, one day in September, Kiki and his father packed their bags and took off on their strenuous journey southwards. Upon their unexpected arrival at their relatives' house, they were greeted enthusiastically, so Papan' i Beby assured me afterwards, and Kiki was welcomed as a new member of the household as if it meant nothing to have someone sleeping and studying in one's living room – which is where Kiki had to stay for lack of other space – for an entire year. Not only did Kiki arrive without any previous warning, but it went without saying that his relatives would pay for his food, clothe him and cover other expenses which might arise, although in the course of the following year, Kiki's parents contributed as much as they could. It is this kind of support one has a right to expect of one's *havana* (kin), and in particular of one's closest kin (*fianakaviana*). Not only was it unthinkable for Kiki's parents not to send him to stay with kin – despite the difficulties of finding a suitable home for him – but the latter, in turn, expected them to do so, as the 'fight' over who exactly Kiki was going to stay with illustrates. *If* Kiki's parents had sent him to an unrelated Adventist family, this would have been a very serious offence to their relatives in town.

One could perhaps object to my example of unconditional support among kin that all the people I mentioned were Kiki's *close* family, rather than distant relatives. However, after I had left Madagascar, Kiki's journey continued. He successfully passed the *bac* in Toamasina and then went on to study law, as his parents wrote to me, at the university of Fianarantsoa in the southern highlands of Madagascar. Fianarantsoa is hundreds of kilometres away from Toamasina and my host family has neither any distant relatives nor any other social contact there. I was curious to find out where Kiki was staying and so I asked them in one of my letters to the family. Intriguingly, my question was never answered, but Kiki's address read *Cité universitaire* which means that he stays in a university hall. Thus even when there were no relatives around, in a place where he had never been before, it was not a possibility for Kiki to stay with other Seventh-day Adventists. Since Kiki moved to Fianarantsoa, Beby has followed in his footsteps to Toamasina and now lives in the living room of Maman' i Beby's brother.

Within his ancestry, Kiki is not just anybody but its future head. At present, Papan' i Beby is head of their ancestry, but because he has lived away from his homeland for so many years and is not expected to return until retirement in another ten years or so, and because his only brother, whom I have already mentioned, is away most



of the year, Papan' i Beby's older sister has been trusted with carrying out his duties as head of the ancestry. However, Papan' i Beby must always be consulted about the concerns of his ancestry, and before any decisions can be taken, his kin must obtain his approval. This is also the case concerning ritual practices the Adventists consider to be the work of the devil<sup>6</sup>. With regard to these, however, Papan' i Beby evades his duty by having told his kin that he does not wish to be involved in any decisions to do with tombs or ancestors.

In his generation within the ancestry, Papan' i Beby is the only man who has a son – Kiki. Therefore, as the only 'son of a son' of his generation, Kiki is the successor of his father as head of the ancestry. There are no two ways about his future role. And this he knows and greatly dreads. Because Papan' i Beby has been temporarily substituted for as head of the ancestry by his older sister, it is all the more important for him and his kin, that Kiki will fulfil his role *personally*. Both Maman' and Papan' i Beby always insisted that Kiki would do so, which also meant that he would have to leave Maroantsetra where he was born and raised. Poor Kiki was horrified by the prospect of being head of the ancestry in a place far away from home (these discussions happened before he ever left Maroantsetra for his studies). He was particularly concerned about the anticipated problem of how to deal with 'things ancestral'. "Just keep your mouth well shut" (*mifody tsara vavanao*), his mother instructed him.

Kiki's different relatives' claims that he ought to be staying with them were certainly amplified by his particular status within the ancestry. However, the main reason why I have discussed his future role as head of his ancestry is his parents' attitude towards kin obligations and their determination to make him fulfil them which the issue brings to the fore.

Kiki's story provides powerful evidence that kin relations continue to be extremely significant within the lives of Seventh-day Adventists and their non-Adventist kin. However, the example also shows the kind of negotiation church members get caught up in when they are faced with decisions they have to take in life. We have seen such negotiation both in relation to finding a home for Kiki in Toamasina, and concerning his and Papan' i Beby's role as head of their ancestry. In both cases, the

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<sup>6</sup> Ritual practices relating to the ancestors are somewhat different in the region where Maman' and Papan' i Beby come from (Brickaville) to those performed in Maroantsetra. In particular exhumation is not practised, I was informed.

family acted on the basis of traditional kinship structure, obligations and rights. But loyalty to the principles of the church made Papan' and Maman' i Beby step over particular kinship rules. They did not send Kiki to stay with his *Papa hely* as they should have done, but to kin with a more suitable life style. Similarly, Papan' i Beby is head of the ancestry, yet he stays away from those practices he disapproves of, and Kiki is told to 'keep his mouth well shut' and not provoke any trouble<sup>7</sup>.

I could add many more stories about how the Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka and their non-Adventist kin continue to engage with each other in ways typical of kin. I will, however, only very briefly mention a few areas of life where the continued significance of kinship ties between Adventists and their families becomes evident.

I have observed more than once in Sahameloka that church members missed a Sabbath in order to attend the wake for one of their kin who had died. On one occasion, a young Adventist woman from Sahameloka got married; to her traditional marriage ceremony (*orimbato*), she invited her kin, but not her *mpiara-mivavaka* – unless they were also kin. When Adventist men went off to Mandritsara (a town a five-day walk away) in order to buy cattle there, they did so in joint expeditions with kin, rather than with *mpiara-mivavaka*. Papan' i Claude, however, whose relationship with his kin has greatly suffered as a result of his attitude at the time of his father's exhumation, went to Mandritsara accompanied only by his son Claude. But when Sahameloka was hit by a cyclone which flattened half of the village and devastated much more, Papan' i Claude's two sisters, whose houses had been destroyed, stood at our doorstep and stayed with us until their own homes had been rebuilt. I had never seen them visit before in all the months I stayed with Papan' i Claude and his family. But in times of crisis, seemingly inexistent kinship ties came to life again.

The ideal of long-term reciprocity between kin is certainly not always lived up to. But the kind of unquestionable support we have encountered in Kiki's story is quite unthinkable among *mpiara-mivavaka* – and indeed, it is unwelcome. This was brought

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<sup>7</sup> On one occasion, the brother-in-law of the Adventist pastor in Maroantsetra, who lived with his sister and her husband, also went to Toamasina for a couple of months. Not only is he the brother-in-law of a still practising pastor, but he is also the son of a retired Adventist pastor. Nevertheless, he stayed with distant non-Adventist kin rather than, say, another pastor in town.

home to me on a number of rather unpleasant occasions, which were triggered by my activities as a fieldworker.

After I had lived with my host family in Maroantsetra for roughly six months, I felt that I needed to broaden my social contacts in order to conduct my research. Although I knew many other members of the Seventh-day Adventist church in town, it was socially impossible to intensify these contacts beyond casual visits at people's houses. My plan was therefore to occasionally go off to different places in the countryside and to spend several days there at a time. Nonsuspecting what was to come, I confronted Maman' and Papan' i Beby with my plans. The intensity of their reaction took me by complete surprise.

'You don't know these people from the countryside! They come and make use of all your things *sans façon, sans façon*! They come and even wear your underwear [slip] if they don't have any, seriously! If you go and stay with them, they will think they have the right to come here anytime they please and burden us with their problems, because everyone knows that you are with us and that you are like our daughter.'

With joint efforts, Maman' and Papan' i Beby continued to paint a very colourful picture of the potential impositions made by the *mpiara-mivavaka* from the countryside that I was planning to get involved with, illustrating the reality of such a threat with examples of people from the countryside who had come and stayed with people in town for weeks, and even months, without contributing as much as one cup of rice. They were clearly afraid of being pushed into social responsibilities they had no interest to enter. They were afraid that by staying and eating with *mpiara-mivavaka* in the countryside, I would create a kind of link between the latter and themselves, which carried the danger of taking on a kinlike quality. During their vibrant exposition as to why they were completely against my plan, Papan' i Beby emphasised that it was precisely because he did not wish to have that sort of relationship with *mpiara-mivavaka* he had not chosen to be friends with, that he never stayed with any of the local members of the church when he had to spend days or weeks in the countryside in his capacity as a hydraulic engineer. Instead, he always stayed with the village president.

For some time, I did not know what to do to broaden my spectrum of in-depth contacts, because I could not just ignore the warnings I had been given. However, a year into fieldwork I decided to move to Sahameloka, although my host family in Maroantsetra was less than happy with that. I pushed my way there for the sake of doing good fieldwork, knowing that I was walking on thin ice, and would have to tread very carefully if I wanted to avoid upsetting my host family in town more than was absolutely necessary.

Unfortunately for me, the relationship between my two host families remained very distant right to the end of my fieldwork, despite the fact that they were all committed *mpiara-mivavaka*. In the course of the six months during which I primarily lived in Sahameloka, but occasionally came to Maroantsetra, they met on a few occasions. From the very beginning, my host family in town made it very clear to my host family in Sahameloka – by treating them like distant acquaintances at best – that they tolerated having a relationship with them only for my sake, for as long as I was around, but that that would not imply entering into any kinlike relationship with accompanying rights and duties.

This is precisely what we have already encountered in chapter 5 in the context of the footwashing ritual. While the ritual is clearly a strong display of community among Seventh-day Adventists, Maman' i Beby, as I mentioned, expressed discomfort at the idea of washing a particular woman's feet. What she thereby effectively did was to refuse the ritual creation of a kinlike community.

There was certainly an aspect of hierarchy informing my host families' attitude towards each other which one must not ignore. In contrast to Papan' and Maman' i Beby, Papan' and Maman' i Claude were not at all disinclined to intensify their relationship to my host family in town. And they may have hoped this would happen through my mediation. Their economic and social status – both within the Adventist church and within the larger society – is clearly lower than that of my host family in town. They are poor farmers in the countryside rather than state employees in town. And they look up to Papan' i Beby as one of the leading members of the Adventist church in the district. Improving their relationship with my host family in town would have created potential advantages for them, both material and symbolic. Although this analysis is obviously much too crude in the way I present it here, I think there is an element of truth in suggesting that those members of the Adventist church who can potentially gain from

acquiring certain new quasi-kin play on the church's proposition that *mpiara-mivavaka* ought to love and support each other and that they are 'kin before God'. In contrast, those members of the church who mainly see the potential for more obligations arising out of a particular relationship are keen to keep the two categories of *havana* and *mpiara-mivavaka* separate.

I do not intend to give the impression that Papan' and Maman' i Beby are particularly unfriendly or unhelpful towards other people, for they are certainly not. In fact, I encountered similar problems while living with my host family in Sahameloka whenever I crossed established social boundaries which set my host family off from other people. These boundaries were not based on kinship or the lack of it (almost everyone in Sahameloka is related to everyone else by either descent or marriage), and I did not always understand why they existed. However, more than once Maman' i Claude, in particular, gave me a very hard time when she thought I was being too friendly or spending too much time with particular members of the Seventh-day Adventist church with whom she had no intention to intensify her relationship.

However, it is not as if unrelated *mpiara-mivavaka* remained complete strangers. On one occasion, for example, Maman' and Papan' i Claude took me to Navana, a small town (or large village) a day's walk away from Sahameloka, which I had long wanted to see. Neither of them have any relatives in Navana and so we stayed with members of the Adventist church for two nights. We expected to be welcomed and we were. However, we made sure not to impose on our hosts and contributed more rice and fish towards our joint meals than the three of us consumed. Although it was normal for us to bring rice, which even kin often do when they visit each other, the contrast between our attempt not to be a burden on our hosts for even two days, and the care provided for Kiki over a year, illustrates nicely the small "tolerance of imbalance" (Bloch 1973: 83) which Bloch has identified as typical of the relationship between non-kin.

As I said above, the notion that *mpiara-mivavaka* ought to support each other on the grounds of their unity as members of the Seventh-day Adventist church is not just empty rhetoric as it might seem at this point. I therefore want to end this chapter on a different note and describe some situations in which church members in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka indeed provided support for each other, well beyond what would be expected of, say, neighbours.

First of all, I have to emphasise that *mpiara-mivavaka*, both in town and in the village, entertained friendly daily relationships with each other. And many friendships had grown out of common church membership, both between adults and children or teenagers. Moreover, *mpiara-mivavaka* accepted food from each other which, in Madagascar, is always a sign of trust, since the danger of what is called *ody gasy* – Malagasy medicine, that is to say witchcraft by poison – is paramount. Furthermore, *mpiara-mivavaka* call upon each other, as they do upon their kin, to perform jobs which are better done in a large group. This was the case, for example, when the house of Maman' and Papan' i Vangé was almost completely destroyed by the cyclone. A few days before they were going to collect new palm tree leaves (which are very big and heavy) in the forest in order to rebuild their house, Vangé, their eldest son, visited all Adventist households in the village asking to “borrow any strong lad” (*mihindrana gôño matanjaka*) to join in their expedition. Many of them turned up and so the job was done in a day.

Inter-Adventist solidarity is particularly marked in the case of illness and death. When a member of the church is seriously ill, the other members are encouraged to visit their brother/cousin (*rahalahy, anadahy*) or sister/cousin (*rahavavy, anabavy*) at home or in hospital at the beginning or the end of a church service. In serious cases, money is collected in church to help cover the costs involved in illness. When Beby had to spend several days in hospital to have an appendix operation, it was – in the absence of kin – predominantly members of the Adventist church who came to visit her, taking the load off the family in keeping the twenty-four-hour watch over the patient (*manao garde du malade*) as is usual in Maroantsetra. It was Maman' i Omino, a close friend of my host family, who stayed with Beby two out of four nights, resting on a thin mat on the hard cement floor beside Beby's bed.

Similarly, in case of the death of a member of the church, or one of their kin, *mpiara-mivavaka* never fail to turn up in great numbers at the wake and to make sure that at least a few of them are present at all times during the wake which normally lasts between one and three days according to circumstances.

While I lived in Maroantsetra, a very tragic incident happened. The fourteen-year old boy of an Adventist family in town who went to school in Toamasina, died of food

poisoning there<sup>8</sup>. As soon as the news broke, many church members immediately went to the family's house to offer their support. And even though it was several days before the corpse actually arrived, the bereaved family was never left alone from the moment the tragedy was known to the day of the actual burial. Neighbours, friends, kin and Adventists were all present throughout the many days of keeping the wake, but the members of the church carried the bulk of the burden of accompanying the family during this time of bereavement. One could even argue that, during these days, the Adventists *claimed* the dead body of the boy as theirs, rather than handing it over to his (almost entirely non-Adventist) kin. For it was members of the Adventist church who went to the airport to receive the dead boy and his mother who had gone to Toamasina to bring him home. It was they who rushed forward as the mother stepped out of the airplane and collapsed with grief. It was the Adventist youth who carried the coffin from the airplane. It was they, too, who lifted the boy's dead body out of the coffin when it had arrived at the family home and put it onto the bed decorated with white cloth, flowers and candles. The entire wake was strongly influenced by the presence of *mpiara-mivavaka*: songs from the Adventist song book were sung, prayers were spoken by the pastor and other members of the church. The Adventists took the lead; everyone else present followed. On the morning of the burial, a special service was held in the Adventist church before the boy's body was taken to be buried in his father's home village, according to local custom. It remains to be seen what will happen when it is time to exhume him.

Before I conclude this chapter, I must say a few more words about the day-to-day relations amongst Adventist and non-Adventist kin. In cases such as Papan' i Claude's, which I discussed at the beginning of this section, kin relations have been seriously, and, one might speculate, permanently, damaged. In most cases though, non-Adventist and Adventist kin interact with each other on a daily basis in the same way other kin do, despite the underlying tension which comes to the fore at, and around the time of, a particular exhumation or sacrifice. The Adventists' willingness to keep ancestral working day taboos (*fady*), which I mentioned in the previous chapter, certainly helps, because, as in the case of Jesus Saves Christians discussed earlier, transgression of a

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<sup>8</sup> This incident was not related to witchcraft by anybody. Eating out in a restaurant, he had been served a tuber which grows among potatoes and is apparently almost indistinguishable from them.

*fady* may trigger *indiscriminate* reprisal, hitting not only the transgressor, but anybody subjected to the particular *fady* being ignored. That was why the Jesus Saves Christians were such a problem for everyone in town. The village's Adventists, however, respect these fears, and keeping working day taboos does not interfere with Adventist principles. Also, most of them are young people and keeping these *fady* is a matter of respect towards their senior kin. Moreover, being young, they often work land which is not their own yet, and so, by disregarding ancestral taboos they would risk losing the basis of their subsistence. However, their conciliatory attitude stops when it comes to the Sabbath, and this is indeed a problem throughout the year. The fact that the Adventists keep their own working day *fady*, Saturday, in addition to the other ones does not, as such, bother their kin. *Fady* in Madagascar are always *specific* to certain groups or people. However, it so happens that in the area of Maroantsetra, Saturday is one of the 'really good working days' free of any kind of *fady*. Not only is everyone out working in the fields, but it is mostly on Saturdays that families may call on their kin to join them harvesting rice or helping with another big job to be done. On such occasions, the Adventists are absent and this does not go unnoticed by their kin. Moreover, such joint working endeavours involve the consumption of a lot of alcohol – another reason for Adventists to stay away. For the same reason, it is difficult for members of the Adventist church to call on their non-Adventist kin to help them with a day's work, because they expect to be offered large amounts of rum in return for their efforts.

## Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, the Adventists are involved in a constant negotiation of their position within different types of social relationships. In particular, they constantly negotiate their position as members of large ancestries and kindreds, on the one hand, and as *mpiara-mivavaka*, on the other. The boundary between these two types of relationships is not always clear either in theory or in practice as the ethnography I have presented demonstrates. For example, joining up for work which is better done in large groups, as church members quite often do, implies a kinlike relationship (Bloch 1994a [1971]: 99). The Adventists' constant negotiation between being embedded in kin networks and at the same time being expected to act as 'kind-of-kin' towards their *mpiara-mivavaka*, is an example of the fluidity of Malagasy kinship in general which has been noted and documented by numerous researches (Southall 1986: 417- 426). This



continual negotiation also demonstrates that Malagasy kinship has to be understood within a *continuum* of different types of social relations (Bloch 1973: 77).

However, the principal conclusion I draw from the ethnography is that, *by virtue* of being *mpiara-mivavaka*, people's relationship does not significantly change. Although many friendships develop or intensify as a result of the fact that the people concerned are *mpiara-mivavaka*, this is so on the basis of *choice*. In contrast, fulfilling one's role as kin – as Kiki's example illustrates – is not a matter of choice, but goes without saying. Although in practice, the intensity of kin relations is always negotiable, at least to a certain extent, kin are basically obliged to act in certain ways towards each other *by virtue* of being kin. Support of the kind typical and expected of kin is, when offered to one's *mpiara-mivavaka* (as for example in the case of the young boy who died of food poisoning – or was this perhaps more of a public statement than an example of support?), a *voluntary* commitment. And as such, it is redeemable at any time, unlike one's commitment towards one's kin. The Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka seem to refuse to let church membership *interfere* with already existing relationships, unless that happens on the basis of their own choice. *Mpiara-mivavaka* have a chosen obligation to support each other, but not a given one. Therefore, church membership, as this chapter has demonstrated, in no way threatens or replaces, but at best supplements, kinship ties.

Cole has described how among the southern Betsimisaraka, kin can either be “thrown away” or adopted through ritual action (2001: 201-202). In the worst cases I know of in my fieldsites, Adventists may be disinherited – although the mere threat of such action often makes people leave the church – but I have never heard of anybody being ritually excluded from an ancestry by their non-Adventist kin. Neither do I know any church members who have actually adopted each other as ‘artificial’ kin (*ôlo atao havana*).

This conclusion provides an interesting contrast to many other studies. In his account which relates to the 1970s, Ross has observed that Seventh-day Adventists in the Solomon Islands “give up traditional kinship obligations and settle in heterogeneous villages with their loyalties going to other Adventists” (1978: 196). In contexts of African Pentecostalism, Maxwell has noted that “[a]cts of traditional commensality are avoided. The church becomes the believer's [new] extended family” (Maxwell 1998b: 354), and Meyer has stressed that Pentecostals often “seek to liberate themselves

socially and economically from their extended families and to be successful in life independently” (Meyer 1998: 320, also see Meyer 1999). Concerning Latin America, it has often been suggested that migrants to large cities find evangelical movements particularly attractive, because they substitute for the kin ties left behind in the countryside. And Marty and Appleby highlight the aspect of community building as one of the defining characteristics of religious ‘fundamentalisms’ generally (1992: 33, 1993b: 3). Although I do not doubt the validity of these approaches within the contexts they describe, I am unable to confirm any of these observations with regard to the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka. It is interesting to note, in this context, that even though my host family in Maroantsetra are a typical example of migrants who have no kin ties in their new home, the Adventist community has not become ‘a new family’ for them.

The fact that the Seventh-day Adventists continue to rely strongly on existing kin relations as I have discussed in this section may also be due to pragmatic considerations, although these were never voiced by any of my informants. Church members know that they will always be able to rely on their kin, but they cannot be sure that they will always have *mpiara-mivavaka*. Particularly at this moment in time, when Adventism is still a recent phenomenon, one simply does not know what will happen and whether in ten year’s time there will be any Adventists left in Sahameloka for example. Kin, by contrast, do not suddenly disappear. It is because of the fact that *only* kin provide long-term security that the church’s requirement not to take part in ritual practices which constitute kinship is such a problem for its members in Madagascar. And this is also why Adventists and their non-Adventist kin take such a conciliatory attitude towards each other, despite the undeniable fact that there is a conflict between them. Both sides know that they rely on each other as kin. It is with these considerations in mind that I claim that potential material savings as a result of not performing exhumation and sacrifice fail as an explanation of the attraction of the Adventist church.

I have emphasised that Seventh-day Adventist practice does not challenge existing kin relations. And this is interesting not only in itself, but also in relation to what kinship is thought to be about. While the relationship between living and dead kin is central to traditional notions of Malagasy kinship, which indeed is partly constituted

through people receiving blessing from the same ancestors<sup>9</sup>, the Seventh-day Adventists have developed a notion of kinship which is very much oriented towards the living.

One of the questions I attempted to answer in this section is whether *mpiara-mivavaka* become like kin. The answer is no. But *mpiara-mivavaka* are neither, just friends, or neighbours. They are in a specific relationship which is continually negotiated and which cannot be subsumed under any existing category of social relations. They are *mpiara-mivavaka*. And that relationship implies friendship on the basis of choice, and a touch of kinship.

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<sup>9</sup> In a recent article on notions of human relatedness among the Vezo of western Madagascar, Astuti discusses how kinship is primarily viewed in terms of one's relationship to the *dead* only at certain moments of life (Astuti 2000).

## **PART TWO**

### **Study and Dis-covery**

In the first part of this thesis I have introduced the people this study is about, and I have drawn attention to the diversity of their backgrounds and biographies. I have also discussed how people's involvement in the Seventh-day Adventist church affects their lives both as individuals, and as persons related to others, in various ways.

In this part, my focus shifts to Adventist practice and thought as I observed it in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, and to how practice and thought are intimately linked to the ways church members in my fieldsites conceptualise the world and the forces at play in it. It is with these that I start.

## **Chapter 7**

### **The Great Controversy**

Of Ghanaese converts to Pentecostalism Meyer writes:

“Through the image of the Devil, Ewe converts were able to deal with the religion and way of life they wanted to leave behind, and from which they could not fully dissociate themselves at the same time. Satan was ‘good to think with’ about the ambivalence entailed by adopting the new ways and leaving the old” (Meyer 1999: 111).

As with the Pentecostalists studied by Meyer, the Devil is an incredibly important figure for the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka. Everything which happened in the past, which happens at the moment and which will happen in the future is a manifestation of the fight for power between God<sup>1</sup> and Satan, known in the Adventist literature as ‘The Great Controversy’ (see e.g. Vance 1999: 40-42). Although

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<sup>1</sup> When the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka speak of God, they use the expressions Andriamanitra, Zanahary and Jehovah interchangeably.

only few church members in my fieldsites may be familiar with this expression, they are all clearly aware of its message and interpret human history, the present state of the world and the misfortunes, big and small, which strike them in daily life, in light of it. Nothing happens by chance; everything is either a manifestation of God's love and protection or else the work of Satan, interchangeably referred to in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka as *i Satana* or *i Devoly*<sup>2</sup>. The Great Controversy is not only central to Seventh-day Adventist official doctrine, but also to how ordinary members of the church in my fieldsites interpret the world. In fact, I was often surprised at the degree of correspondence between the official/global and the local view in this regard.

Within this grand historical scheme of events, every single person is conceptualised as a little platform on which God and Satan carry out their struggle for ultimate power over the world and the universe. And indeed, people's minds and bodies are the sites where world history is constantly being made.

### God's and Satan's angels

According to my informants in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, there are – although invisible to the human eye – at all times two angels (*anjely*) sitting on the shoulders of every person. On the right shoulder sits one of God's angels, on the left, one working for Satan. As people go through life and are faced with decisions to be made, God's and Satan's angels whisper inaudibly into the ears of their hosts trying to win them over to their respective side. Each time one of the angels that sits on people's left shoulders wins this continual tug-of-war, "Satan is happy, but Jesus cries" (*faly i Satana, mitomany i Jesôsy*), and vice versa. Kiki once told me with great admiration of a Seventh-day Adventist who was apparently always careful not to brush his *right* shoulder against anything and not to lean his *right* shoulder against a wall lest God's angel should be uncomfortable, although of course he knew that angels can sit on air. This was his daily way, so Kiki concluded, of signalling to Satan that he had no chance to win him over. The two angels that sit on a person's shoulders, so many people told me, keep a written

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<sup>2</sup> Theories which "biblicize history and current events" (Harding 1994: 62) with reference to the power struggle between God and Satan are extremely widespread among Christian 'fundamentalists' (see e.g. Harding 1994, Coleman, S. forthcoming).

record about battles lost and won; at the time of the Last Judgement, their books will be presented to God.

While good and bad angels literally sit close to people's *minds*, in some situations the struggle between God and Satan is of a distinctly *bodily* nature. A particularly vivid and dramatic example I witnessed one Sabbath morning in Maroantsetra town illustrates the embodiment of the Great Controversy.

### Denise's baptism

That morning, almost two hundred people were about to be baptised as Seventh-Day-Adventists<sup>3</sup>. Among them was Denise, a young woman who had been a spirit medium since childhood. As such, from the Adventists' point of view, she was perceived as actively serving the Devil for many years; and he consequently now had a firm grip on her life. In fact, the spirit (*tromba*) who possessed her had, as she explained to me, "bought her life" (*voavidiny ny fiainako*). As a baby she had actually died, physically: her body was cold and she had stopped breathing, Denise told me. Her parents were already preparing for the burial<sup>4</sup> when the spirit brought her back to life. In return, she was to serve him (it was a male spirit) for the rest of her life. Denise had fulfilled her predicament so far, but now she wanted to get rid of her spirit who, she felt, was getting increasingly in her way and had stopped her from getting married to someone she loved. After years of toying with the idea of joining the Adventist church, she had therefore finally decided to get baptised.

As everyone was gathered in the church and the pastor took those to be baptised through the first part of the baptismal ritual, which culminates in their acceptance of the Adventist creed<sup>5</sup>, Denise suddenly stormed out of the church, screaming, ran through the courtyard and finally collapsed under a shelter. Several people had followed her and

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<sup>3</sup> This was one of two occasions of mass baptism which happened during the 19 months of my fieldwork. Normally, only between 2 and perhaps 15 people would be baptised at any one time.

<sup>4</sup> In Maroantsetra, as elsewhere in Madagascar (on the malleability of personhood, see Bloch 1993a), children who do not have any teeth yet are not considered full persons, and when they die are disposed of with little ado. In Maroantsetra, such 'water children' (*zaza rano*) used to be wrapped in cloth and then left exposed to the elements on top of a tree. However, some years ago, this practice was made illegal by the Malagasy government, so that nowadays, 'water children' are buried, but with no ceremony and without a coffin.

were now kneeling beside her holding her trembling body down, loudly begging God to help her defeat her spirit (Satan), who was obviously trying to stop her from getting baptised. Eventually, she calmed down and went back into the church. Satan had lost this battle. However, the fight over her person was not over yet. Later, as she was about to get baptised by full immersion into the sea, the pastor spoke intense prayers with and for Denise. He and three other church members held her firmly as the big moment approached, supporting her in the physical struggle that she was about to experience. Everyone present held their breath for they all knew that the spirit was powerful and might actually kill her if she was not fully committed. The pastor later told me that those supporting her had felt her body trembling with the spirit's last effort to keep control over her life. But God was stronger and Denise had proven her will to follow Him. And so when she reappeared from under the water, she threw her arms up towards Heaven shouting "Halleluja!". Relief, excitement and a sense of victory and jubilation took hold of the crowd. That morning, Denise literally embodied the power struggle between God and Satan<sup>6</sup>. Satan's influence and power, however, do not only manifest themselves during such dramatic events, but are omnipresent in daily life.

### **Satan's omnipresence**

From the grand schemes of world history to the minutest, mundane detail of everyday life, everything on this earth and beyond is touched by the Great Controversy. There is no person or thing which could not potentially become a site of war. Members of the Adventist church likewise interpret illness, violence, corruption, consumption of alcohol and drugs as evidence of Satan's machinations, as they do any behaviour considered to be immoral such as not respecting one's parents. Satan is held responsible for the very existence of death – it was he who tempted Adam and Eve – as he is responsible for the death and suffering caused by accidents or natural disasters. People recognise multiple levels of causation in the same way as the Azande, so well described by Evans-Pritchard (1937). But from the point of view of the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and

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<sup>5</sup> Baptism is the only time when the creed is spoken by church members; it is not part of a normal Seventh-day Adventist church service.

Sahameloka, ultimately all evil stems from the Devil and, as for the Azande, there is no such thing as a stroke of fate.

When one day in Maroantsetra the house of a couple, who had recently shown interest in becoming members of the Adventist church, burnt down, church members interpreted this event as Satan's warning to the people concerned, although they did not dispute that the fire had spread from the hearth. Similarly, it was obvious to Maman' and Papan' i Beby why only *one* of the numerous books in my wardrobe, namely a book by the Adventist prophet Ellen White, got covered with mildew, because my other books – inoffensive material such as dictionaries and novels – would not attract the anger of the Devil.

### God's apprentice

God and Satan are thought of as being almost equally strong – *almost*, because in the end, God will win, as foretold in the Bible. Moreover, they fight with the same kinds of 'weapons'. Why is this so? The reason brings us to the Seventh-day Adventist theory of the coming about of Evil which was explained to me on several occasions by different members of the church both in town and in the village; in fact, I was astonished how 'correctly' they reproduced this particular part of global Adventist doctrine. This is how it goes:

'Before the creation of life on earth, God had created a great number of angels, one of whom was Lucifer. At first, Lucifer was a good angel serving God like all the others, but as time went on, a greed for power developed within him, which made him want to challenge God and control the universe himself. Lucifer, from then on called Satan, thus started a conspiracy amongst God's angels and finally managed to win over one third of them to his evil intentions. It is these angels which sit on people's left shoulders helping Satan to tempt humankind.'

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<sup>6</sup> Coleman discusses the embodied nature of religious commitment among Swedish members of a Protestant charismatic movement from a different perspective (Coleman, S. 2000: 134-142; forthcoming).



What is particularly relevant in this theory of the beginning of Evil is the fact that Satan was God's apprentice prior to his fall, as it were. Hence, he knows God's ways (*ny fomban' Andriamanitra*) which, as Maman' i Omino eloquently explained to me, he copies and imitates in order to operate powerfully in this world.

"Satan knows all of God's secrets [*sekre*]. Adventists don't eat shrimps, they don't eat crab. Satan has stolen [used] these [secrets]! The reason why he has stolen these things is simple: he knows God's rules, and so he stole them and imposed them on people as his own. Many people suffer from liver disease. What does the doctor tell them not to eat? Crab and shrimps, because these make the disease even worse. Satan knows this! What is not good for us? Crab and shrimps! They are not good for our health. And so one must not eat them. That is why people really believe in Satan, they really believe in him strongly! Because Satan used to live in Heaven, he knows that one must not eat crab and shrimps."<sup>7</sup>

Maman' i Omino continued her discussion of how Satan steals God's secrets, a little later comparing spirit possession, which Seventh-day Adventists consider the work of the Devil, with the tenth plague of Egypt and the Passover as told in Exodus 12.

"[The spirits tell their mediums] to mark their houses with white chalk, and then the mediums do this. When the children of Israel left Egypt, what happened? [God said to them:] Mark your houses! Because [the Israelites] slaughtered [ate] a lamb and God told them to mark their houses [with the lamb's blood]. Mark every door, [he said], so that I won't enter your

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<sup>7</sup> *Fa sekren' Andriamanitra jiaby hainy. Tsy mihinana ôraña Advantista, tsy mihinana fôza Advantista. Nalain' i Satana anie izy io e! Nalainy le raha satria, ny antony nangalany azy dia tsotra: Fantany zeny, le raha mbô mifanarakaraka amin' Andriamanitra kôa, mbô nalainy izy io, nataony. Matetika anie misy ôlo takatra maladie de foie, tsy mahazo mihinana inona izy, hoy i doketera? Tsy mahazo mihinana fôza izy, tsy mahazo mihinana ôraña izy, satria mampitombo ny aretiny. Fantatr' i Satana kôa raha zay! Fa tsy mahasoa ainantsika, ino? Ny fôza ndraiky ny ôraña. Tsy mahasoa, tsy mahatsara antsika, dia tsy azo hohanina. Ary zeny mahatônga ôlo tena mino azy, mino azy tanteraka! Ary le fôza sy ny ôraña efa fantatr' i Satana fô, izy tany an-danitra, dia tsy azo hohanina.*

houses. Because I will kill many people, I will kill all the first-born [children and animals] in this town. Exactly the same [with the spirits]. Satan [in the guise of a spirit] tells people to mark their houses [with white chalk], so that when his angels pass by, they see who is theirs. When God's angels passed by [the houses of the Israelites], what happened? They saw the marks on the houses.”<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, Maman' i Omino went on, spirit mediums have to go through a ritual called *barisa* which involves having 'holy water' (*rano masina*) poured over them. From the Adventists' perspective, *barisa* is clearly an imitation of the ritual of baptism, called *batisa* in Malagasy, and as such another striking example of how Satan has stolen God's secrets. It is precisely because Satan has learnt his job from God Himself, that he is in command of such powerful tools as healing and 'baptism'. In a similar vein, Satan has copied the written word as a powerful way of communication.

### The written word

One Wednesday evening, the pastor in Maroantsetra brought a very unusual document to church which he agitatedly discussed for about half an hour. The document in question was a sheet of paper with text on either side – *signed by Lucifer!* This document came directly from the Devil himself, so the pastor explained to the amazed and completely gripped congregation. And it revealed Satan's plans of how to make the Christians, and especially the Seventh-Day-Adventists, stray from the God's path. The document especially encouraged people not to fast and not to pray. But not only that; it mentioned a conference of all Satanists to be held in the near future. The agitated nature of the pastor's explanations made it obvious that he had no doubt as to the authenticity of this communication.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ataovy tsipiky tranon' andre, tsipihiny i le tranon' azy. Tamin' ny zanak' Israely niboaka avy tany Ejipta, ino ny zavatra nitranga? Ataovy mariky, ny tranonare. Satria nihinana ondry zeny zareo, dia koa lafa lany, hoy izy, ataovy mariky, isaka varavaranan' andre, mbô tsy hidirana reo. Satria handeha hamono ôlo zeny zareo tamin' io andro io. Hamono le talañolon-draha jiaby amin' ny tanàna io. Karahan' izeny koa. Ny anazy mañano marika amin' ny anazy. Mbôra, izy koa efa mandalo akeo ny anjelin' azy, mahita fa ity ny anahy. Ka lafa nandalo teto ny anjelin' Andriamanitry, nanakory? Hitan' le mariky ny zanak' Israely.*

When I asked him the following day where exactly this document had come from, and how the Adventists of all people had acquired it, the pastor explained that it came from a church in Zaire, namely a group of Satanists who had formed a so-called 'Eglise du Satan'. Such Satanic churches, he informed me, exist all around the world, but in particular in Western countries, because in places like Madagascar where people are involved in idolatry serving Satan in this way, there is less of a need for Satanic churches. However, this group of Satanists in Zaire, the pastor went on, had also published a revised version of the Bible which had been stripped of important books and passages, notably the Books of Revelation and Daniel, which are amongst the most important books for Seventh-Day-Adventists. The document he had presented in church was addressed "à tous les Satanistes" and had only by accident fallen into the hands of members of the Adventist church in Zaire who subsequently distributed it among the members of their church in different countries. I never found out more about it.

At first, this might sound like a rather bizarre story. However, when one thinks about it, one realizes that to accept the document the pastor had brought to church as truly coming from Satan is not fundamentally different to accepting the Bible as God's word. If God had chosen the written word as a powerful medium to make His will known, why should the Devil not make use of this efficacious tool of 'evangelisation' in his own way? And indeed, this was precisely how the pastor and other people responded to my doubts concerning the authenticity of the document in question, which must have been written all over my face when I asked them about it.

### **God and Satan as moral persons**

The ethnography I have presented makes it clear that God and Satan not only use similar 'weapons' to fight for their respective causes, but that both are highly personified and, to a certain extent, humanised in the Adventists' way of thinking about the power struggle that goes on between them. With regard to their physical appearance, God is believed to have the body of a man<sup>9</sup>, because He created Adam 'in his image'. Concerning Satan, my informants were less clear as to whether 'he' was male or gender-neutral like an

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<sup>9</sup> This concept contrasts to the indigenous Malagasy notion of a Creator-force called Zannahy who is sometimes, for example during cattle sacrifice, addressed as both male and female (*Zannahy lahy*, *Zannahy vavy*).

angel<sup>10</sup>. However, he (or perhaps it) is certainly thought of as having a human-like body with a head, shoulders and arms.

Moreover, God's and Satan's *minds* are strikingly similar and reminiscent of the mind of human beings. The tug-of-war between God and Satan is not primarily understood to be between two *sources* of power, but between two competing *personalities* who seem to be guided by motivations characteristic of humans, such as love and hate, craving for power, envy and revenge. Also, the way in which both Satan and God make their presence felt on earth is often strikingly mundane, as though thought up by a human brain. One might wonder for example why a being as powerful as the Devil should bother to make mildew grow on my book, or why the Creator of all things should depend on His angels' records at the time of the Last Judgement. Why would the most powerful beings in the universe resort to such pragmatic means? The reason is that they are perceived to be, and act, very much like (im)moral persons<sup>11</sup>.

Satan's character is indeed reminiscent of that of a cunning politician who uses intrigue and trickery to fool people and to make them buy his lies. This was brought home to me on one occasion when the pastor and Papan' i Beby agitatedly discussed the machinations of the Devil. In particular they discussed how the recent economic boom in the area – on the surface due to a sudden increase in the price of cloves on the global market – had made many people act selfishly and immorally, spending lots of money on alcohol, prostitution and the like. In the view of the pastor and Papan' i Beby, Satan even influences the world economy so as to help his wicked cause.

### **A matter of choice**

We have seen how absolutely everything which happens in this world, from the great sweep of world history to the minutest detail of everyday life, is, from the point of view of the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, a manifestation of the power struggle between God and Satan. It is because God's arms and Satan's tentacles reach every corner of human existence that there is no neutral space that one could

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<sup>10</sup> Gender is not marked in Malagasy.

<sup>11</sup> This concept of the morality and immorality of God and Satan respectively also stands in contrast to the concept of Zanahary who is "not associated with a moral purpose" (Bloch 1995a: 67).

possibly occupy. Hence everyone *must* choose either God or Satan as their ‘master’ (*tompo*). The option of not making such a choice does not exist (*Tsy maintsy misafidy!*)<sup>12</sup>. God and the Devil are each other’s antithesis and accepting one of them implies rejecting the other. If they are like day and night, then dusk and dawn – being in a state of uncertainty or transition – are dangerous times during which one is exposed and vulnerable, as Denise’s story illustrates. There is no safe in-between.

To make a choice is not only a necessity; the ability to choose is also considered a precious gift (*Misy safidy!*). If God had wanted, He could have made robots, Papan’ i Beby once explained to me, but He did not. And indeed the very existence of Evil is based on Lucifer’s ability to make a choice. And Papan’ i Beby continued to say that following God was in fact only valuable if it was based on someone’s choice to do so.

Interestingly, the pastor once explained during a Wednesday evening service in church that both young children and slaves were not going to be held responsible for their actions at the time of the Last Judgement, because they had no choice<sup>13</sup>. Children whose parents will go to Paradise will go with them. But the children of parents who fail to be among the saved, will not themselves have to suffer punishment; they will be painlessly annihilated and will vanish as though they had never existed. But because what they did was not informed by choice, they cannot ascend to Heaven. Similarly, slaves, the pastor continued (using the word *andevo*), do not act out of free choice and thus, at the time of the Last Judgement, they can neither go to Paradise nor will they suffer. As with children, because they cannot be held responsible as full persons who act out of free choice, their existence will be wiped out.

In his explanations, the pastor represented full human personhood as dependent on the very ability to choose, and on that basis, he excluded both children and slaves from it. It is important to keep in mind that the pastor was not referring to descendants of slaves (some of whom were possibly sitting in the audience) for, as I explained in chapter 2, they are now considered full persons in the area of Maroantsetra. However, the pastor’s speech might have been influenced by the fact that he himself comes from

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<sup>12</sup> The pastor once explained to me that one either has a contract (*fanekena*) with God, or else with Satan.

the highlands where slave status has proven a much more rigid feature of social life than on the east coast. What the pastor was explaining was his theory of personhood. I do not know the official Seventh-day Adventist doctrine concerning the salvation of children or of slaves, but it is certainly remarkable how well the pastor's theory fits with Malagasy notions of personhood. As I mentioned in footnote 4, in Maroantsetra as elsewhere in Madagascar, children are not considered full persons before they have teeth. And neither are slaves, because they are, as noted in chapter 2, excluded from the cycle of social reproduction.

### Clarity of mind

To make a choice for God, is, for the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, a choice for clarity of mind. Choosing God is often spoken of as choosing the *mazava*. The notion of *mazava* is a very powerful one in the area of Maroantsetra and elsewhere in Madagascar. It captures a variety of meanings, all of which are associated with clarity and light ranging from something having been properly understood, to open space and good views (Bloch 1995a)<sup>14</sup>. The concept of *mazava* will be discussed below.

Moreover, choosing God is also a choice for clarity in the way church members conceptualise what it means to be a Seventh-day Adventist. This became clear to me during the Sabbath School on a Saturday morning a few months into my fieldwork in Maroantsetra. The topic for discussion this week was 'inspiration' (*tsindrimandry*). The members of the church discussed two different kinds: inspiration by God as opposed to inspiration by Satan. Their discussion can be summarised like this. 'While Satan inspires people in their sleep (making them dream of their ancestors being cold in their tombs, for example), God chooses prophets who, when seized by His inspiration, are startled as though from deep sleep, suddenly feeling wide awake'. When I asked Papan' i Monde for his conversion story a few months later, he explained:

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<sup>13</sup> At the Last Judgement, all human beings who have *ever* lived will be judged, thus the pastor talks of the salvation of slaves despite the fact that slavery has long been abolished in Madagascar.

<sup>14</sup> *Mazava* stems from the root *zava*, which denotes light, clarity, transparency, precision ('lumi re, clart , transparence, nettet '; Abinal & Malzac 1993: 869).

“I was like somebody who is unconscious, I was like someone who sleeps, but then suddenly wakes up. I was still asleep when I converted [moved to the other place]; it was only when I arrived there, that I woke up.”<sup>15</sup>

Thus when people are under Satan’s rule, they are in a state of mental sleep, of unconsciousness; their minds and senses are clouded and, as a result, they lose control over themselves. This is exactly what happens with spirit mediums during possession, my Adventist informants told me many times: they lose consciousness and have no memory of what is going on, because their minds are invaded and taken over by the Devil. One person described this as a state of “not being free” (*tsy libre*). In contrast, church members feel that their choice for God was a choice for an unclouded vision of reality, a choice for clarity of mind.

## Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would like to emphasise three points which the foregoing discussion reveals. First, in the ways the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka conceptualise the world and the forces at play in it, the Devil is equally important as God. Accepting the Adventist God implies adopting the concept of the omnipresent Satan (Meyer 1999).

Second, Satan does not only promote wickedness and immoral behaviour, but the main effect of his machinations is that people are *deceived*, that they cannot see clearly<sup>16</sup>. And people are so easily deceived by Satan, because, as we have seen, he copies God’s powerful ways.

Third, my discussion makes a strong point for the translatability of imported concepts. Many studies of religious conversion, most famously Rafael’s work on 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century Catholicism in the Philippines (1993 [1988]), emphasise how concepts of incoming religions are changed in the process of indigenisation, to the extent that they

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<sup>15</sup> *Karaha ôlo torana zaho, karaha ôlo nandry .... nifôha. Izy mbôla mandry afindra amin’ ny toeran-kafa, tonga eo izy sao mifôha.* In this particular context it is not relevant whether Papan’ i Monde’s description of his conversion experience was a retrospective construction, because his words express his subjective experience as a Seventh-day Adventist.

<sup>16</sup> According to Snow & Machalek (1983: 266-269), the idea that the past was full of deception is typical for converts in general. Also see Josephides (1982: 18, 157) on this point.

acquire an entirely different meaning in a new context. In contrast to such studies, my data shows how the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka have made certain aspects of Adventist doctrine, such as the Great Controversy, their own in a strikingly *unmodified* form. The same applies to the notion of free choice which is clearly a Protestant legacy, but which has nevertheless been taken on board by ordinary church members in Madagascar. In other words, it would be wrong to suggest that although Seventh-day Adventism is a global phenomenon, its different manifestations around the world have little in common. I am not at all denying that the Malagasy members of the church *actively* make the doctrine of the Seventh-day Adventist church *their own*, but I think it would be misleading to overemphasise the degree to which they change what they are offered by the global church. I will come back to this point in the conclusions to this thesis.

However, at the same time as recognising the continuity of concepts in different cultural contexts, one must not assume that this is necessarily due to globalisation, because apparently typically Western notions or concepts may not be *limited* to the West alone. The notion of choice, for example, which the Seventh-day Adventists emphasise so much, is not only a typically Protestant one. Thus, Feeley-Harnik emphasises the significance of personal choice among the Sakalava of western Madagascar who are notoriously resistant to Christianisation (1991: 155).

Maman' and Papan' i Claude converted to Seventh-day Adventism nine years ago after Claude's recovery from severe illness. Since they have been with the church, none of their children has fallen seriously ill. But what would happen if they were suddenly struck by an unusual amount of misfortune? Would they perhaps interpret this as the ancestors striking back for having been neglected? Would they perhaps feel forced to leave the church? One can never know, but my guess is that they would interpret any future misfortune as Satan's work, because after so many years of being practising Seventh-day Adventists, they have developed an alternative framework of interpretation.

The cyclone which struck Sahameloka in April 2000 exemplified the Great Controversy. The Adventist church was razed to the ground, while the Catholic one was hardly damaged at all and the Protestant only needed its roof repaired. Satan had chosen



his targets carefully. At the same time, church members remarked that none of their houses, in contrast to many others, had been completely destroyed. As the cyclone howled above our heads and made the corrugated-iron roof of our house shake and lift, Claude and his mother fell on their knees praying to God for protection. The house withstood the storm, a clear sign that God had heard them. Two days after the cyclone, the water had receded enough to make it possible for people to go and inspect the damage done to their fields and their land in the forest. My host family had been badly hit. Much of their rice harvest had been destroyed, and hardly a clove tree still stood upright. Satan had targetted them, because they were Seventh-day Adventists.

## **Chapter 8**

### **The ambiguous ‘ways of the ancestors’ and the construction of ancestral religion**

In chapter 7, I discussed how Satan is omnipresent in the world of the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, and how his influence is felt in numerous kinds of ways. However, for Adventists, Satan’s favourite trick, in Madagascar at least, is to act in the guise of ancestors. And it is because he has copied God’s ways and has thus come into possession of powerful tools such as healing, that he is able to fool the Malagasy into thinking that the forces they are dealing with, in particular the ancestors, are indeed powerful. Papan’ i Fredel’s elaboration of the Devil’s trickery is highly typical.

“God tells us that it is not the ancestors who speak to you, but that the Devil pretends to be God. When the Devil was thrown down to this earth, he wanted to get all the glory for himself and to replace God. And if one does not believe this, one will say: ‘It is the ancestors who speak!’. But, if one believes in the word of God, one says that it is the Devil who speaks with the voice of the dead. That is how I understand it. And when I started to study the Holy Scripture, I had to say that this is true. Surely, the dead are not able to speak, but the Devil – God’s enemy who wants to get all the glory for himself – he speaks with the voices of many people, and he knows how to make people ill. When people fall ill, they are easily deceived and so they say: ‘The ancestors have power’. But if one then gives him [the Devil] a bull or a cow [in a sacrifice to the ancestors] – he who has made you ill in the first place – then the person will recover, and so one says: ‘The ancestors are real!’. Because as soon as the sacrifice was done, they recovered! That’s what people think. One really recovers, because it was the Devil in the first place who made you ill. But when he

receives his cattle, he will leave the person in peace and they will recover.  
Because they followed him.”<sup>1</sup>

Numerous other members of the Adventist congregations in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka gave me often almost identical explanations, always using phrases which evoke pretence and disguise (such as *malaka sary* [to copy], *misandoko* [to pretend]) on the part of the Devil. Satan rewards those who fulfil his demands, but he punishes those who fail to do so. It is because Satan has a profound and powerful influence on people’s lives – making them ill or well, giving or depriving them of children, making their land fertile or barren, making them rich or poor – that people get trapped. While I have mentioned the Adventists’ notion of Satan masquerading as one’s ancestors already in several places in the present thesis, this chapter explores the issue of how they conceptualise ‘the ways of the ancestors’ in more detail.

### **The ambiguous ‘ways of the ancestors’**

As long as people remain blinded by the Devil’s disguises, they are under his full control and cannot possibly escape from his tentacles, because to do so would cause his anger, which is highly inadvisable. However, church members always emphasised, when talking to me about this topic, that once one has made a choice for God and one is under His protection, then the Devil ceases to have power over one’s life (although he will keep trying and one must therefore make a constant effort to ward him off). So it is that they have *not* been struck by misfortune since they stopped exhuming their ancestors. Papan’ i Fredel again:

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<sup>1</sup> *Ny tenin’ Andriamanitra hoe, tsy le razana miteny, fô le devoly misandoko le Andriamanitra izy miteny. Le devoly rehefa naidina ambony ny tany aty, io mbô haka voninahitry manôkana, hisolo Andriamanitra. Ke raha ôhatra tsy mino zeny anteña, milaza fô, le razana maty miteny. Fa raha mino ny tenin’ Andriamanitra anteña hoe, i le devoly izy malaka le feo le ôlo. Zeny arakaraka ny fahaizako azy. Ke rehefa nodinihiko ny Soratra Masina, marina izeny, hoy izaho. Ny maty, hoy izaho, tokony tsy afaka hiteny. Fô le devoly, rafin’ Andriamanitra avy tany mbô halaka voninahitra manôkana izy, malaka safidy tendan’ ôlo jiaby, ary izy mahefa mankarary le ôlo. Rehefa marary le ôlo, voafitaka amin’ zeny, le ôlo hoe, milaza fa, manankery ny razana e! Kanefa izy avy akeo manome aomby azy, izy nankarary iny, ambelany ke sitrana le ôlo. Ke milaza anteña fô, eh, misy antony tatô la ny razana fô, i tsaboraha ka vita koa, naivana e! Zeny ne fihetran’ le olom-belona. Sitrana, satria i devoly nanery anteña iny nankarary le ôlo. Ke izy koa nahazo ny aombin’ azy izy, tsy hitany le ôlo, fa ambelany, satria nanaraka azy.*

“[The ancestors] don’t trouble *us* anymore, even if we don’t exhume them, but all those people who still depend on them get troubled, they get troubled by Satan.”<sup>2</sup>

Although, as discussed in an earlier chapter, leaving the ancestors behind is not primarily an attraction, but – because of the tension this creates among kin – a problem for the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, church members do express relief at having been liberated from all the burdens that Satan, alias the ancestors, used to impose upon their lives. Papan’ i Emilie (Maman’ i Claude’s brother) once explained to me that what made ‘the ways of the ancestors’ so bad (*mamparatsy ny fomban-drazana*) was the fact that ancestral demands were absolutely “*obligatoire*”!

‘If your child falls ill, and someone who knows things (e.g. a diviner) tells you that your ancestors demand a sacrifice, you *must* do it under all circumstances (*tsy maintsy!!!*), even if that means that you have to sell your only piece of land in order to buy a bull. You have no choice! (*tsy misy safidy*)’.

The transition from moving away from Satan’s control to being firmly rooted within God’s protective fence – a metaphor Maman’ i Omino once employed – is particularly dangerous. Denise, whose baptism I discussed in the previous chapter, was reminded by several church members, among them Papan’ i Beby, that because she was in a transitional period at that point, she would have to be especially vigilant studying the Bible and keeping the Sabbath as well as God’s taboos. Because, by having taken the step of actually getting baptised, she had angered Satan, and when angry, he is particularly dangerous.

The demonisation of indigenous concepts and powers is a process which has been documented in numerous contexts of Christianisation in Africa, Latin America, Asia and elsewhere<sup>3</sup>. In contrast to many Catholic and Protestant denominations who

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<sup>2</sup> *Fô efa tsy manery izahay, na zahay tsy mitsabo azy, fô i ôlo aby mbôla mifikitra amin’ izy fô tereny, teren’ i Satana.*

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Taussig 1980, Lehmann 1996: 139-142, Harding 1994: 62, Meyer 1998, 1999. Regarding Seventh-day Adventism in other contexts, see Josephides 1982: 141-142, Chowning 1990: 49, 53, Westermarck 1998.

tend to interpret phenomena like ‘ancestor worship’ as superstition, Seventh-day Adventist doctrine – globally and as it is understood in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka – emphasises the reality of ‘ancestral’ power by way of associating it with the Devil. Thus, ironically, doctrines such as those of the Seventh-day Adventists reinforce precisely those indigenous concepts which are their main targets. In Meyer’s words:

“... demonisation by no means implies that the former gods and spirits will disappear out of people’s lives. As servants of Satan they are still regarded as real powers that have to be dealt with in a concrete way – rather than as outmoded ‘superstitions’, as modern Protestant theology would have it” (1999: xvii).

However, the demonisation of ancestors gives rise to a certain ambiguity in the way church members in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka talk about the reality of ‘ancestral power’ at different times. Let me start with another story Papan’ i Fredel told me one afternoon in Sahameloka. He was telling me how, long before he became an Adventist, he had gone to offer rum to the ancestors.

“I shook hands [with one of my ancestors]. His [or her] hand was very, very cold! One didn’t see him, because this happened at night; one mustn’t [call the ancestors] before it’s dark; when night comes, when it starts to get dark, that’s when one calls them. [Me: Did you really feel his hand?] Yes! I felt it, yes. And we also offered rum [he mimes putting a bottle down]. We heard how [the ancestor] took [the bottle]. We heard how he drank: ‘cho! cho! cho! cho!’. We heard him drinking the rum, we heard him drinking the rum! Later on, when the ancestor was gone, we saw that although we had heard him drinking lots, the bottle was only a tiny bit less full. But what was left was not strong rum any longer; the strength of the rum had gone.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Tamin’ ny zeny, nifandray tañana. Nangatsiaka (drawn out to stress) tañan’ anazy! Izy tsy nahazo zahany, satria andro maiziny, tsy azo atao raha ôhatra mazava le andro, andro ho aliny, andro maiziny, zay mañantso azy. Afaka fandray mañano io (gesture). Fô izy mangatsiaka (drawn out) le tañan’ anazy! (...) Ie, reny, ie! Tamin’ ny zeny, toaka zeny, alefa mañano io (gesture), apetraka, mañano io iny (gesture). Reny izy malaka azy. Reny izy “cho!*

Papan' i Fredel has clearly no doubt about 'ancestral' power except, as he now knows, it was not his ancestor who drank the rum they offered, but the Devil in disguise. Other church members, however, expressed scepticism at times towards the reality of such experiences as Papan' i Fredel's.

Once I attended a sacrifice which took place in Sahameloka on a Saturday morning. It was extremely tolerant of Maman' and Papan' i Claude to let me go since it was a Sabbath, but they did so more or less on the condition that I would join them in church in the afternoon. And so I did. After the service, Papan' i Silivie and Papan' i Tahina, two young, very committed church members, took me to the side and enquired: 'Did you ask the people responsible for the sacrifice (where, as always on such occasions, a bull had been killed and then consumed by both the community of the living, and the ancestors, to whom certain parts of the killed animal had been offered) whether the ancestors *had actually eaten* their part?' When I replied that I had not, unfortunately, asked this question, which the two men obviously considered to be very significant, they offered me their own answer which they formulated more or less like this:

'The Malagasy really believe [*mino*] that the ancestors eat the meat offered to them at sacrifices. But is it not patently obvious that that isn't actually the case? Because after all, everyone can see with their own eyes [*hita maso*] that nothing at all happens with the ancestors' share of the killed animal, and that all of it is still there at the end of the ritual. How could the dead possibly eat anything, since they don't have a mouth to eat with any more?! But [shaking their heads about the absurdity of such a notion] the Malagasy think that the ancestors actually eat their share!'

On another occasion Dadin' i Miri (Miri's grandmother), who had just turned to Adventism after some forty years of being a spirit medium, illustrated the absurdity of such 'Malagasy beliefs' by pointing out that the ancestors could not possibly eat any of

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*cho! cho! cho!''*. Izy migiaka toaka io. Ia, reny izy migiaka toaka io. Izy avy akeo, raha ôhatra lasa izy iny, mahita i cho, cho-be' anazy, hôatr' i... (gesture) fôña lany. Fô le tavela amin' ny zeny, tsy mahery, lasa le fofon' ny toaka le mampahery azy.

the meat offered to them in sacrifice, because their stomachs were already rotten, and that clothes brought to the graves would likewise rot.

Papan' i Fredel's experience of how he went to offer rum to the ancestors, and the above accounts, offer apparently divergent theories of 'ancestral power'. While Papan' i Fredel's account emphasises the reality of his experience, it seems that Papan' i Silivie and Papan' i Tahina, as well as Dadin' i Miri, talk of 'Malagasy beliefs' (*finoana gasy*), implicitly, as superstition.

Both types of statements were voiced by many members of the Adventist church in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, although most narratives I obtained echoed Papan' i Fredel's interpretation. Moreover, many church members hold both these views *at the same time*, moving between one and the other. In many of the narratives I recorded, one and the same person at some stage views alleged ancestral power as superstition, but at another stage of his or her narrative emphatically talks about 'the real existence of Satan' (*tena misy i Satana*), proof of which is the power of the 'ancestors'.

The reason why we encounter two apparently different interpretations of 'ancestral power', and why many church members hold both at the same time, is simple. Seventh-day Adventist doctrine makes two propositions. First, it claims that the dead are nothing but a pile of rotting bones (*Maty dia maty* [Dead is dead!]! *Tôlaña fô* [Just bones!]). From this follows the interpretation expressed by Papan' i Silivie and Papan' i Tahina: to believe that dead people can eat meat is ridiculous.

However, Seventh-day Adventist doctrine also makes a second proposition, which immediately follows the first, namely that the *power* of what are allegedly the ancestors is real, as I discussed in chapter 7. From this follow statements such as Papan' i Fredel's above, in which he emphasises that he actually touched the hand of his ancestor, and that it felt really cold. While the proposition that the dead are just a pile of rotting bones removes the members of the Adventist church from the traditional Malagasy view of ancestral power by denouncing it as an illusion, the second one, in a sense, once again reduces the distance produced by the first. One could perhaps say that Papan' i Silivie and Papan' i Tahina's interpretation of cattle sacrifice has become invaded by a 'non-Malagasy' view, while Papan' i Fredel interprets what he used to do with the eyes of a Malagasy, whose blindfold as to the true identity of the 'ancestors', however, has been removed. However, both these views are contained in the Adventist image of the Devil, in which 'ancestral power' is at the same time denied ('it is not the

*ancestors*’) and confirmed (‘but the *power* is real’). It is because of this, that church members make both types of statements discussed in this section, which could be understood, at first sight, to be contradictory. However, it is also possible that Papan’ i Silivie and Papan’ i Tahina actually thought of the belief in ancestral consumption of sacrificial meat as superstition at that moment. Significantly, they did not suggest – unlike Papan’ i Fredel – that although the meat was still there at the end of the ritual, it had lost its strength (taste). Rather, they suggested in their statement that nothing at all was going on.

In fact, the issue of ‘ancestral power’ and the state of the dead, as talked about by the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, seems to me to be surrounded by various ambiguities. Whenever the topic of exhumation came up in my discussions with members of the Adventist church, they would immediately state that exhumation was completely nonsensical and pointless (*tsisy dikany, tsisy varany*), because the dead were “just bones” (*tôlaña fô*). And they were quick to point to the relevant Bible passages. At the same time, though, many church members in Sahameloka expressed their wish that the village’s Seventh-day Adventists have their own burial ground; Papan’ i Silivie was particularly eloquent on this topic. The desire for a pan-ancestry Adventist burial ground stems from the fact that the members of the church know perfectly well that their non-Adventist kin will exhume them – as a means of self-protection against potential ancestral wrath – even against their explicit will. I know of two cases in the area where a child of Adventist parents was exhumed by its non-Adventist kin against the explicit will of its parents. In fact, the Adventists do not raise the issue of a separate burial ground for the village’s Adventists with their non-Adventist kin, because, as Papan’ i Silivie explained to me, they know that the elders would never give permission for such an endeavour. However, what seemed interesting to me was the question of why – if the Adventists thought that the dead were nothing but bones – it would make any *difference* to them that their own bones, or those of their children, might be exhumed. Why would they want to have their own burial ground to stop this from happening, if for them exhumation was just a matter of digging up a bundle of bones? When I put this question to Papan’ i Silivie, he answered, after a few moments’ hesitation, that it was *fady* (taboo) for Seventh-day Adventists to be exhumed, because



that was equivalent to co-operation with the Devil<sup>5</sup>. However, it seemed to me that at that moment, Papan' i Silivie was not quite certain – and neither was Maman' i Claude who was also present at that discussion – whether or not dead people's remains were really just a pile of rotting bones.

### **The construction of ancestral religion**

While church members may, at times, be ambiguous about the state of the dead, I was stunned by the *lack* of ambiguity in relation to what exactly the Seventh-day Adventists – when looking at the world through Adventist spectacles – consider as *fomban-drazana*, literally: the customs, or the ways, of the ancestors. For non-Adventist Malagasy in the area, exhumation, cattle sacrifice, vows to one's ancestors, spirit possession, divination, traditional medicine and witchcraft are not at all one and the same thing. But in Seventh-day Adventist talk, all of these phenomena are lumped together as manifestations of Satan's many disguises and generically referred to as *fomban-drazana* (the ways of the ancestors). In fact, practices such as spirit possession, witchcraft and exhumation are often employed interchangeably, without any differentiation.

The term *fomban-drazana*, when employed in this way by the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, is a novel construction on their part. In the ordinary usage of the term, in the area of Maroantsetra and elsewhere in Madagascar, respecting and stooping to elders, or planting rice, are as much examples of *fomban-drazana* as invoking one's ancestors in ritual. All these are considered Malagasy 'ways of doing things', hence 'the ways of the ancestors': *fomban-drazana*. Though of course this does not mean that things designated as 'of the ancestors' are necessarily particularly old, it does mean that they are considered as being truly 'of us' (see Bloch 1994a [1971], Feeley-Harnik 1991, Cole 2001). However, Seventh-day Adventist discourse has constructed its own version of *fomban-drazana*, by which is meant everything that is somehow associated with the 'supernatural'. Such a usage of the term *fomban-drazana*, in contrast to its ordinary usage among Malagasy people, creates a notion of 'religion' as

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<sup>5</sup> This explanation also testifies to the significance of the concept of *fady* within Adventist practice and thought. Following Lambek (1992a), the construction of certain ritual practices as Adventist *fady* can be seen as part of the Adventists' construction of themselves as moral persons. Karen Middleton (1999b) argues, discussing the decline of the circumcision ritual among the Karembola of south Madagascar, that by turning a previous ancestral custom – circumcision – into an ancestral taboo, it is actually remembered and thus 'kept alive'.

disembedded, separated from such activities as farming or stooping to elderly people. It is this notion of *fomban-drazana* as separate religion that Seventh-day Adventists define themselves against. “The Malagasy do *fomban-drazana*, the Adventists don’t” (*mañano fomban-drazana ny Malagasy, tsy mañano fomban-drazana ny Advantista*)”, they would often state.

What is particularly interesting with regard to the notion of *fomban-drazana* as a kind of separate religion, is the fact that the Seventh-day Adventists in my fieldsites *anachronistically* introduce this notion in to what were past practices. And in doing so, they often use the word *mino*. As it is important to understand what the Seventh-day Adventists mean by *mino*, and its related noun *finoana* with regard to my overall argument, I will briefly introduce this concept here.

The notion of *mino* has multiple meanings<sup>6</sup>. However, the members of the Adventist church in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka define it, first and foremost, as trust/belief in that which one has not seen with one’s own eyes (*tsy hita maso*)<sup>7</sup>. Papan’ i Beby once illustrated the meaning of *finoana/mino* to me in the following way. He was chopping firewood, I was sitting nearby and we were discussing what it meant to *mino*. He picked up a very thorny branch from his pile of wood, held it under my nose and told me to close my eyes and to stretch out my open hands, palms up. As soon as I had done so, he told me to clench my fists, which I did after a moment’s consideration that I may prick my fingers. But of course he had pulled the branch away before I hurt myself. “You see, this is *finoana*” (*hitanao, izany ny finoana*), Papan’ i Beby triumphantly exclaimed as his experiment had been successful. Because although I could not see with my eyes closed whether or not he had pulled the branch away, I had trusted him.

I said above that the Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka *anachronistically* use the notion of *fomban-drazana* as separate religion when they talk of past experiences. Thus when answering my questions concerning their lives prior to their conversion to Seventh-day Adventism, church members would refer to the times “when we still trusted/believed in the ancestors” (*tamin’ ny zahay mbôla nino [past*

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<sup>6</sup> The noun *finoana* and the verb *mino* stem from the linguistic root *ino* which means: the action of agreeing, of submitting unconditionally, of declaring oneself convinced and persuaded; of believing, of accepting the verities of faith (*Action d’acquiescer, de se soumettre sans réserve, de se déclarer convaincu et persuadé; de croire, d’admettre les vérités de la foi* [ Abinal & Malzac 1993: 281, my translation]).

*tense of mino]* ny razana), which they contrasted with “now, that we don’t trust/believe in the ancestors anymore” (*efa tsy mino ny razana amin’ ny izao*). Likewise, they would claim that “the Malagasy trust/believe in ancestors” (*ny malagasy mino ny razana*<sup>8</sup>) or, which to them is roughly the same, that they trust/believe in spirit possession (*mino ny tromba*), or in traditional medicine/witchcraft (*mino ny fanafody gasy ny malagasy*), or – as Maman’ i Omino summarised all these examples in a statement I quoted in the previous chapter – that the Malagasy really trust/believe in Satan (*tena mino azy, mino azy tanteraka*). And, as I noted above, practices such as exhumation, sacrifice and spirit possession are all, indiscriminately, defined as *fomban-drazana*.

This is an *anachronistic* definition of *fomban-drazana* (‘the ways of the ancestors’) as religion (trust/belief in ‘supernaturals’), because for non-Adventist Malagasy, in the area of Maroantsetra and elsewhere in Madagascar, the concept of disembedded religion is closely associated with Christianity, but is inappropriate in relation to ancestors (as well as in relation to spirit possession and traditional medicine for example). As Kopytoff has discussed long ago with regard to elders and ancestors in Africa (1997 [1968]), and as Bloch discusses in detail with regard to Malagasy ancestors (Bloch forthcoming, see also Astuti 2000), the Malagasy do not relate to their ancestors as supernatural beings completely different to elders, but communicate with them in particular circumstances in ways which are reminiscent of the way they relate to elders. What matters is what one has to *do* for one’s ancestors, what one must not do because it is *fady* (taboo), and how, in turn, the ancestors’ actions might influence one’s life, rather than what kind of beings they are. Hence non-Adventist kin of members of the Adventist church are not concerned about the Adventists’ *view* of the ancestors. What is significant to them is whether or not the Adventists *attend* exhumations and *keep* ancestral taboos.

By introducing the notion of religion as trust/belief in clearly segregated entities when they talk of *fomban-drazana* (exhumation, sacrifice etc.), the Adventists thus model *fomban-drazana* on Christianity, representing such practices as exhumation and cattle sacrifice as a ‘religious’ matter. In other words, they christianise *fomban-drazana* and by doing so, they construct an opposition between two alternative ‘religions’:

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<sup>7</sup> The pastor once defined *mino* as: *zavatra tsy hita ekenao ho marina* (‘to agree that something one cannot see will become true’).

<sup>8</sup> In the local dialect, the typical Malagasy linguistic structure whereby the subject is placed at the end of a sentence, is often reversed.

Seventh-day Adventism on the one hand, *fomban-drazana* on the other. As two alternative systems, which are, however, similar in nature, Adventism and *fomban-drazana* become comparable – rather like two currencies – and as such competitive, and all the phenomena lumped together as *fomban-drazana* become ‘false religion’.

It is not by accident, but a manifestation of the comparability of these two systems (and also a manifestation of the fact that Satan copies God’s ways) that church members sometimes pointed to explicit parallels between *fomban-drazana* and Adventism. For example, Papan’ i Beby once explained the following analogy to the participants of a Sabbath School discussion. ‘When someone falls ill’, he began, ‘the Malagasy sometimes sacrifice a bull to their ancestors so that the sick person may not die. Thus in cattle sacrifice, the life of the animal is exchanged for the life of a person. The death of the bull brings life. The same exchange of death for life happened when Jesus Christ died in order to save humankind. His death will bring us eternal life’<sup>9</sup>. Other people drew a similar parallel between ‘praying’ (*mivavaka*) and ‘invoking the ancestors’ (*mijoro*), because, as Maman’ i Beby said, both are to ask for help and protection (*mangataka*).

The process of the construction of ancestral religion via the category of *fomban-drazana*, as I observed it, is in some ways similar to Bloch’s description of what happened in 19<sup>th</sup> century Imerina under Queen Ranavalona (Bloch 1986: 20-21). When Christianity began to pose a threat to the monarchy’s power, it came to be constructed in opposition to ‘Merina religion’, which the queen claimed to defend, while previously, ‘religion’ had been inseparable from ‘kinship’ and ‘politics’. With the construction of ‘Merina religion’, however, the state commissioned books which became conceptualised as an alternative to the Bible.

We have seen how in local Adventist talk, *fomban-drazana* – an amalgam of practices and concepts which Seventh-day Adventists consider to be manifestations of Satanic power – are constructed as ‘religion’ comparable to Christianity, and also how such usage of the term differs from more ordinary usages when *fomban-drazana* means ‘Malagasy ways of doing things’ in a much broader sense, including such things as respecting old people. This double usage of the term *fomban-drazana* has significant implications, however.

In the course of my discussion in this chapter, I have quoted several statements in which members of the Adventist church contrast ‘the Malagasy’ on the one hand, and ‘the Seventh-day Adventists’ on the other; for example, when they say “The Malagasy do *fomban-drazana*, the Adventists don’t do *fomban-drazana*”, or “The Malagasy trust/believe [*mino*] in the ancestors, the Adventists don’t”. Such statements are baffling, because obviously, the members of the church in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka who made them are both Malagasy and Seventh-day Adventists. But in such talk, it is as if they imagined themselves not to be Malagasy. Such propositions are extremely ambiguous and contradictory, because the members of the Adventist church in daily life do talk, and think, of themselves as Malagasy; they always explicitly included themselves when they explained to me that ‘we Malagasy do this and that’. Moreover, as I demonstrated with regard to the issue of kinship, they are very keen to *remain* as what they think of as being Malagasy, i.e. being embedded in kinship. The reason for the representation of themselves as not Malagasy revealed in the above statements lies in the ambiguity of what is meant by *fomban-drazana* to which the members of the church are exposed.

Within the Adventist discourse of *fomban-drazana*, to say that the Adventists do not do *fomban-drazana* is merely to state that they no longer trust/believe (*mino*) in the ancestors, and therefore, do not attend exhumations, cattle sacrifice and the like; in other words, that they have changed ‘religion’. The *Malagasy* concept of *fomban-drazana*, however, does not single out ‘religious’ matters, but includes such things as respecting one’s elders and cultivating rice on land one has inherited from one’s forebears. In ordinary Malagasy talk, *fomban-drazana* is everything that the living have learnt from their ancestors; it is a mode of life. And in that sense, doing *fomban-drazana* is to be Malagasy.

The Adventists in my fieldsites are explicitly only against *fomban-drazana* in the *Adventist*, i.e. ‘religious’, sense of the term discussed above. They are, as I mentioned in an earlier chapter, not at all against everything which present generations have learnt from their forebears, far from it. In fact, my Adventist informants consider respectful behaviour towards elderly people, for example, a key element of moral behaviour, and they lament the disappearance of such behaviour among the younger generations. And,

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<sup>9</sup> Peel points to the concept of sacrifice as a “point of contact” (p. 179) between Yoruba

to give another example, the members of the church value the notion of one's ancestral homeland (*tanindrazana*) as much as everybody else. Thus during his farewell speech in church prior to his departure to study in Toamasina, Kiki announced proudly that he was "going back home to the land of the ancestors" (*mody amin' ny tanindrazana*). Like everybody else, the Adventists *also* refer to such things as respecting the principle of seniority, or being attached to one's ancestral homeland, as *fomban-drazana* (or alternatively *fomba Malagasy* [Malagasy traditions]), and they emphasise the moral value of following in the footsteps of one's dead forebears. And when they talk of *fomban-drazana* in the non-Adventist, Malagasy sense, they always *include* themselves in the category of those who do *fomban-drazana*, in contrast to when they speak of *fomban-drazana* in the Adventist sense as false religion.

It is precisely because of the fact that in ordinary Malagasy terms – which church members have *not* shed as a result of having become Adventists – *fomban-drazana* is a whole way of being, that the church's requirement to reject *fomban-drazana* can, at certain moments, be understood as a call to not be Malagasy, although in the Adventist discourse, the Malagasy members of the church are merely asked not to ritually invoke their ancestors. The church tells them they must give up *fomban-drazana* (exhumation etc). Yet when they hear that requirement as *Malagasy* people who understand *fomban-drazana* in a much broader sense, then that statement suggests that they ought to stop being Malagasy, and that instead they ought to become members of a foreign religious community. That requirement, however, they cannot, and do not wish to, fulfil.

Moreover, their non-Adventist kin look at and interpret the Adventists' rejection of *fomban-drazana* from a Malagasy point of view. When Papan' i Claude refused to eat with his kin at his father's exhumation, *he* refused participation in *fomban-drazana* in the Adventist sense of that term. His kin, however, understood his position as a refusal of kinship, a refusal to be part of their community.

The Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka are constantly confronted with this double understanding of what the term *fomban-drazana* indicates, yet they cannot split themselves into two halves. Therefore, at one moment, they imagine themselves as part of a global church community, not Malagasy ('The Malagasy do *fomban-drazana*, but we Adventists don't'). Yet at the next moment, they imagine

themselves as *Malagasy* (Seventh-day Adventists) and part of a local community. Because of the co-existence of a novel, Adventist construction of *fomban-drazana* as religion and the Malagasy understanding of *fomban-drazana* as much more than exhumation and sacrifice, church members find themselves in continual oscillation between different ‘ways of being’, since they are exposed to *both* understandings of what are *fomban-drazana*. It is this oscillation which might make them wonder sometimes what exactly the church demands of them and, as a consequence, who they feel they are.

I do not wish to overemphasise the extent to which the members of the church imagine themselves as not Malagasy. Their holding onto traditional kinship structures, as demonstrated in chapter 6, clearly demonstrates the *limits* of the power of the non-Malagasy discourse. When Maman’ i Claude was confronted with the explicit implication of that discourse on reading one morning that “If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple”, her interpretation that that particular Bible verse was among the ones that were “not all that good”, amounted to a clear and unambiguous rejection of the idea of not being Malagasy. But there are *at least moments*, when church members seem to imagine themselves as part of a global church community which looks at the Malagasy from the outside.

## Chapter 9

### Studying and Learning

I began the previous chapter with Papan' i Fredel's explanation of how Satan operates in this world. Let me restate the beginning of his account:

“God tells us that it is not the ancestors who speak to you, but that the Devil pretends to be God. When the Devil was thrown down to this earth, he wanted to get all the glory for himself and to replace God. And if one does not believe this, one will say: ‘It is the ancestors who speak!’. But if one believes in the word of God, one says that it is the Devil who speaks with the voice of the dead. *That is how I see it. And when I started to study the Holy Scripture I had to say, that this is true.*”

It is to the significance of his last two sentences highlighted in italics that I now turn and which the remainder of this thesis will be mainly concerned with.

What struck me most during fieldwork among the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra town and the village of Sahameloka was the enthusiasm with which men and women, boys and girls, actively engaged in Bible study and the effort they made to improve their Biblical knowledge. This happened in two different contexts. On the one hand, there was a very strong focus on Bible study as part of the institutionalised setting of Seventh-day Adventist church services. On the other hand, the members of the church also studied the Bible at home throughout the week which, living with two different host families at different times, I was able to observe in two unrelated households. I will first discuss and illustrate this more informal context of Bible study and then move on to its more institutionalised forms.

The basis of the Adventists' study activities, whether at home or in church, is their so-called ‘Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide’. This is a three-monthly



booklet translated from the original English version, which is produced in the United States, into hundreds of languages including Malagasy<sup>1</sup>.

For each and every day there is a specific lesson (*lesona* in Malagasy), dealing with topics such as “Death in the animal kingdom”, “The Biblical flood and modern geology” or “The healing power of God’s creation”<sup>2</sup>. These daily lessons are meant to be read and discussed by all Seventh-day Adventists world-wide. Here is an example of such a lesson in its English version including, as always, numerous Biblical references to be read while studying the text provided.

**“Sunday”**

***December 19***

### **CITIZENS OF A NEW COMMUNITY (Phil. 3:20, 21; 2 Cor. 5:1)<sup>4</sup>**

#### **What does Paul say about our true citizenship? Phil. 3:20.**

This earth, contaminated with sin and wickedness, is not our true home. The Lord has promised us “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet. 3:13). Clearly, the present condition of this world shows us that we are near the end of all human sorrows. The day is coming when everything will become new forever. Even today we see many signs announcing that the “new earth” is near.

“The Christian needs a constant awareness of the fact that he is a citizen of heaven. Attachment to one’s country leads him to be loyal to it. Wherever he may be living he will conduct himself in a way that will honor the good name of this country. Keeping in mind the kind of life we expect to live in heaven, serves to guide us in our life on earth. The purity, humility, gentleness, and love we anticipate experiencing in the

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<sup>1</sup> I quote: “The adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide is prepared by the Sabbath School/Personal Ministries department of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. The preparation of the guides is under the general direction of a world-wide Sabbath School Manuscript Evaluation Committee, the members of which serve as consulting editors. The published guide reflects the input of the committee and thus does not solely or necessarily represent the intent of the authors” (see any Bible Study Guide, contents page).

<sup>2</sup> These examples are taken from the Bible Study Guide of October-December 1999.

<sup>3</sup> All bold and italic passages in the original

<sup>4</sup> The Seventh-day Adventists use the (New) King James Version of the Bible (NKJV). As there is no Malagasy translation, church members in Madagascar use the standard Protestant translation of the Bible.

life to come may be demonstrated here below. Our actions should disclose that we are citizens of heaven. Our association with others should make heaven attractive to them.”

– *SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 172.

**Why does Paul compare our earthly body to a tent and the body we will have in heaven to a “building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens”? 2 Cor. 5:1.**

Himself a tentmaker, Paul makes an accurate illustration of our earthly body. Just as a tent is made of earthly materials, so is the body. Just as a tent is a temporary dwelling, so is the body. And just as a tent can be easily destroyed, so can the body.

In John 1:14, we read that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (NKJV). The original word translated “dwelt” literally means “tented” among us.

Peter also compares our earthly body to a tent in 2 Peter 1:13, 14: “Yes, I think it is right as long as I am in this tent, to stir you up by reminding you, knowing that shortly I must put off my tent, just as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me” (NKJV).

**As our body grows older or becomes diseased, we become increasingly conscious of how wonderful it will be to have “a building from God, a house not made with hands ...” (2 Cor. 5:1, NKJV). What about this “building” from God will you be most grateful for?”**

The seven lessons of a week, an example of which is provided above, are organised around a specific topic, such as “The Heavenly Family”, as above, or “Creation in six days”, thus forming a chapter. At the beginning of every new chapter to be studied, there is a “Key Thought”, or a “Key Question”, to be kept in mind while studying the week’s lessons. At the end of every week, there are several “Discussion Questions” and a “Summary” of the week’s main topic. The 13 weekly chapters of one booklet in turn relate to an overall topic such as “The Nature of Man”, or “God Shows and Tells: Studies on Revelation and Inspiration”.

Because the text of any Study Guide is, in literally translated versions, exactly the same world-wide, it is inevitable that some lessons are at least partly inappropriate for

readers in places like Sahameloka or Maroantsetra. On the 16<sup>th</sup> June 1999, for example, it remained a complete mystery to them – even to Papan' i Beby – what on earth was to be understood by “New Age”, upon which the day's lesson elaborated and which it criticised, and which I, being asked to explain this bizarre expression, only partly succeeded 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 (see introduction), this is in fact rather surprising. However, the Adventists in Sahameloka and Maroantsetra never failed to make the text meaningful for themselves by concentrating on particular passages to which they could relate. And indeed, whenever it happened that the congregation in Maroantsetra or in Sahameloka received their new Bible Study Guides with delay, there was a real sense of losing out on study material, and church members awaited the arrival of their new Guide with impatient anticipation. While they were left without new lessons to be studied, they improvised, either by repeating old lessons, or else by selecting particular Bible passages themselves which they then engaged in reading and discussing.

### **Studying and learning at home**

#### The Morning Watch

Besides the daily lessons provided in the Bible Study Guide, church members are meant to read the so-called Morning Watch (*fiambenana*), provided in a supplementary booklet to the Guide. The Morning Watch, which serves as a motto of the day, usually consists of just one Bible verse as well as a short explanatory passage taken from one of Ellen White's books. Most church members in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, however, are not in possession of any of Ellen White's books and thus confine themselves to reading the relevant Bible verse. Quite often, therefore, my host family in Sahameloka were not clear as to the meaning of the text they read in the morning. But in spite of that, and even when they had lots of work waiting for them and were already running late, they never neglected the Morning Watch which they supplemented with singing and prayer. My

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<sup>5</sup> Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide, 19<sup>th</sup> December 1999 (in: October-December 1999:

host family in Maroantsetra, being in possession of several of Ellen White's books, most days read the entire text suggested.

### Studying the daily lesson

In the households in which I lived, studying the lesson provided in the Bible Study Guide formed an integral part of the daily evening routine, lasting for about fifteen minutes to half an hour, rarely more, or less. Although it would be an exaggeration to say that everyone present always engaged enthusiastically in Bible study, most days in both families, the daily lesson was studied attentively and with much engagement on the part of the participants.

In Maroantsetra, we almost always studied the lesson after dinner, and most days we did so properly; rarely, however, it was a rather hasty exercise which seemed to be conducted more out of a sense of moral duty than anything else. Mostly, though, studying the lesson was a daily activity my host family took very seriously.

With my host family in Sahameloka, the pattern was somewhat different. Their enthusiasm for studying the lessons came and went, but when they went through a good phase which could last for several weeks at a time, they always studied the lesson very thoroughly and not at all hastily – sometimes it took almost an hour – even after a long, tiring day out in the rice fields. However, when they went through a less eager phase, lasting perhaps for a week or ten days, daily Bible study was omitted altogether. In both families, active participation in Bible study was always entirely voluntary and there was very little pressure exercised by the more eager members of the family on the others to actively take part in the discussions.

In both households, the most literate member of the family took the leading role during Bible study. In Maroantsetra this is clearly Papan' i Beby who, as I mentioned earlier, is extraordinarily versed in Biblical matters. And so it fell to him to guide us through our daily Bible study. After an initial prayer spoken by Maman' i Beby, and sometimes a song, Papan' i Beby began to read and explain the text provided in the Study Guide. Maman' i Beby offered her own thoughts and views on the topic at issue, and occasionally asked for clarifications. I asked questions, which both of them

answered with interest and patience. While Kiki, being eighteen years old, was supposed to take part in our adult discussions, Beby, who was only fifteen at the time, had her own Bible Study Guide specifically written for the younger members of the church, from which she was meant to learn a lesson every day by herself. However, the children were always encouraged not to neglect their homework for the sake of Bible study, which both Kiki and Beby often seemed to give preference to, over maths or geography.

Of the members of my host family in Sahameloka, Claude, the eldest son, is the most literate and educated and so he basically acted as teacher. It was usually Claude who read the actual text from the Bible Study Guide, and who offered most explanations and clarifications for the others. His mother, and sometimes his father, too, made comments and suggestions as to how the text could be understood. On the rare occasions when Claude was not around, his mother took over the leading role since she is the only person in the family, apart from Claude, who can read more or less fluently. Because Papan' i Claude is unable to read a text such as the lessons provided in the Study Guide, he was confined to making verbal contributions. Mazava, the fourteen-year-old girl and the two younger boys, aged about nine and four, never took any active part in these discussions and very often fell asleep before they came to an end. Mazava was sometimes asked to read the Bible verse in the morning, but she was embarrassed about the inadequacy of her reading skills and normally gave up – giggling, ashamed – after having given it an unsuccessful try.

Whatever the intensity of the participation of various family members during daily Bible study, it was clearly undertaken in a spirit of learning, and the focus always lay on discussion and comprehension of the text presented in the Study Guide and accompanying Bible passages.

Sometimes, Papan' i Beby, and also Papan' i Claude and his son, went away for a few days or even weeks (Papan' i Beby for work-related reasons, Claude and his father to buy cattle). On such occasions, they never failed to take Bible and Study Guide with them (both families had more than one copy of each).

### Neighbourhood meetings

Once a week, on a Monday evening, church members are supposed to study the lesson not with their family at home, but together with others who live in their neighbourhood.

However, our neighbourhood group in Maroantsetra, which consisted of three families, only met irregularly and there were long phases during which we never met at all. However, when we did come together to study the lesson, the discussion was always lively, and although usually someone took on the role of teacher, everyone present was encouraged to offer their own suggestions and opinions on the day's lesson and many people did so. The couple of times it happened that the teacher more or less delivered a monologue, this was duly criticised afterwards as not being the proper way of Bible study which ought to involve and engage all participants. Communal singing and praying was also an important part of these meetings. In Sahameloka, I only observed neighbourhood meetings happening once or twice, though I was told that people do meet, though not necessarily on a Monday evening.

#### Learning on the spur of the moment

In both my host families, Bible study was a prominent feature of daily life, and I was often impressed by the eagerness with which they went about it and the genuine engagement with, and discussion of, the presented text. However, what to me was even more remarkable was to see people engaging in Bible study on the spur of the moment, that is outside the somewhat routinised context of studying the daily lesson. I could observe such spontaneous learning efforts in both my host families as well as with many other Adventists I knew both in town and in the village.

Claude, from my host family in Sahameloka, could often be seen sitting on his bed or on the veranda completely absorbed in studying his Guide or his Bible, sometimes taking notes on a loose sheet of paper. He also knew a great number of Biblical verses by heart. I especially remember one summer evening when we were all sitting on a mat outside the house, looking at the bright stars above us and enjoying the pleasant warmth of the evening. We were just sitting there relaxing, without talking very much, when all of a sudden Claude started to recite Bible verses – always stating their precise place in the Bible – which he continued to do for about half an hour without stopping. His parents, too, sometimes took to studying the Bible spontaneously, Maman' i Claude while sitting in the kitchen waiting for the rice to cook or at any time which happened to be convenient. But it was Papan' i Claude who impressed, and moved, me most in his effort to learn.

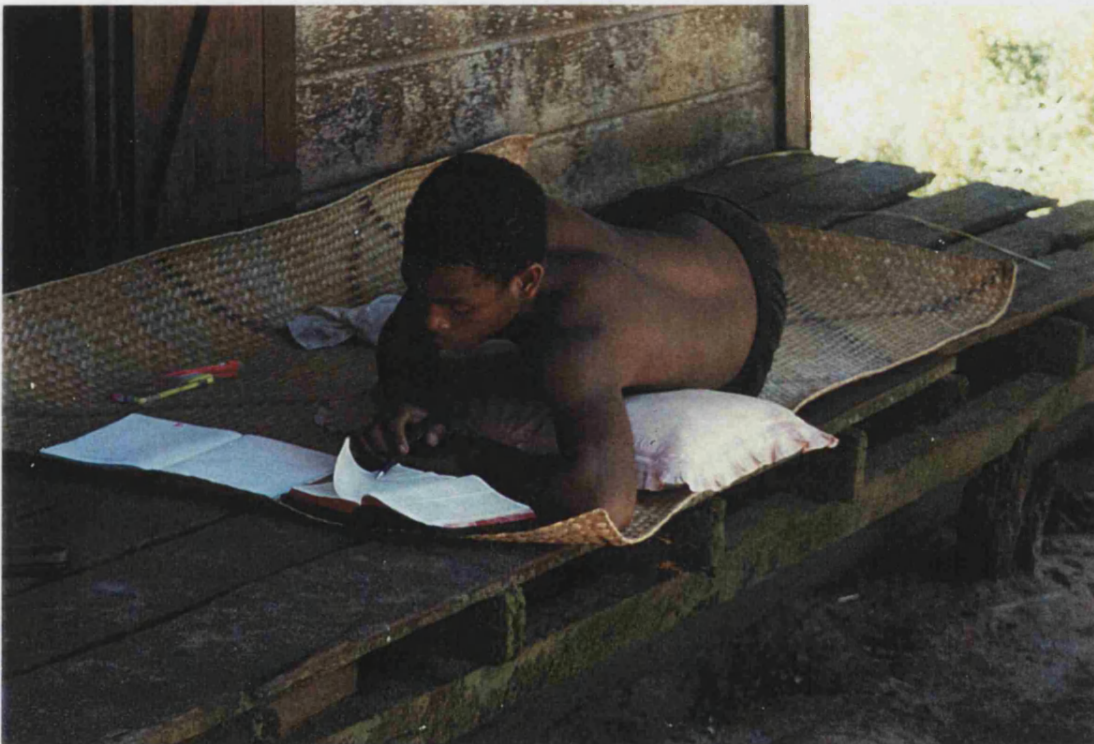
As I have already mentioned, Papan' i Claude is practically illiterate. Writing especially is extremely difficult for him, and he struggles to sign his name. His ability to read is better, but still very limited so that it demands a lot of concentration and patience on his part to read a whole sentence or an entire paragraph. When studying the lesson together with other people – with his family at home in the evening, or in church during Sabbath School (see below) – he mostly listens silently to what other people say; only rarely does he make an active contribution. He is very much aware of his lack of literacy and, as a result, he has little confidence in his intellectual abilities. And so, even when he had actually studied the daily lesson every day of a week at home with his family, he did not dare to claim to have done so on the Sabbath, in church, when people were asked to state how many times they had studied at home during the week<sup>6</sup>. He timidly responded to our encouragement to raise his hand, that he was not knowledgeable (*tsy mahay zaho*). Nevertheless, sometimes, when he was at home on a rainy afternoon, he picked up the Bible and tried to read from it, and on such occasions he was very much involved in what he was doing, and could go on for half an hour or more. He sat there by himself struggling with the particular passage he had chosen to tackle, forming every word with his lips, muttering to himself. Nobody normally saw him doing this; it was his private effort to learn.

Kiki, the boy from my host family in town, was very eager to study as well. Often I found him sitting at his table bent over a chaos of exercise books, and when I asked him what he was doing, it turned out that he was revising and writing out a fair copy of the sermon of the previous Sabbath, during which he had taken quick notes. He did this completely of his own accord, nobody told him to do so. At other times, he would lie casually on his parents' bed or on a mat on the veranda reading the Bible opened up in front of him and, equipped with a ruler and a number of coloured pencils, would underline those passages he considered particularly important (see photograph 2). Kiki's younger sister Beby spent a fair amount of time writing down neatly a passage from the Bible to which her attention had been drawn, and decorating her page with flowers and

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<sup>6</sup> Statistics concerning such issues as the amount of private Bible study, or hours of missionary work undertaken, are gathered every Sabbath morning in church. This information is passed on to the Adventist headquarters in Antananarivo. Although people are proud to be able to raise their hand to the question "Who has studied seven times this week?", I do not think that it is group pressure which motivates people to study.

ornaments. She also continually sang church songs while doing some task around the house. I saw Maman' i Beby engaged in spontaneous Bible study less often, though that might have been because when I was around we normally chatted. However, once she read the entire St. Matthew's Gospel while Papan' i Beby was away in the countryside with his work for more than two weeks. Papan' i Beby, on his part, often devoted a lot of his scarce time to reading the Bible or one of his many Adventist-inspired books.



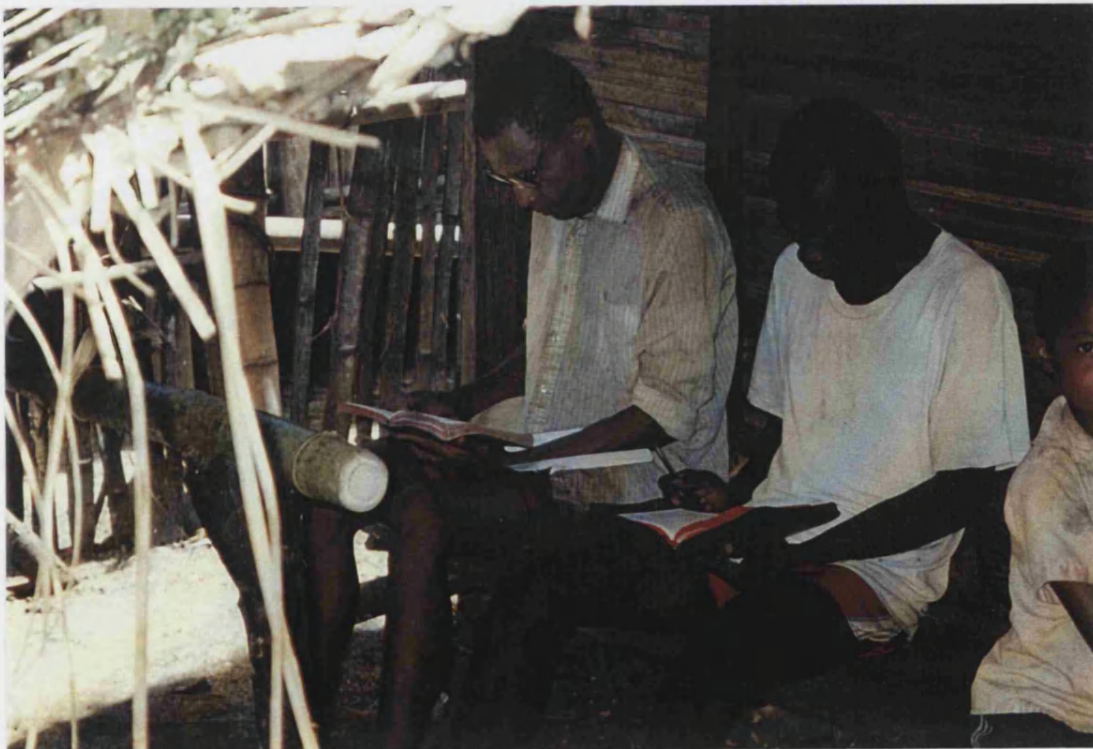
photograph 2: Kiki studying

Church members' level of literacy in general, and Bible expertise in particular, varies greatly. Papan' i Claude, for example, cannot use the Bible or the Study Guide in the same sophisticated manner as Papan' i Beby. However, although there is a vast gap between the level of education of the two men, and although Papan' i Claude struggles to read just one paragraph while Papan' i Beby reads long and complicated texts with complete ease, they are alike in their eagerness for Bible study and their effort to learn.



Whatever church members' level of Biblical expertise, they are constantly involved in a process of learning, and steadily increase their individual stock of Biblical knowledge.

In the course of my fieldwork, I witnessed countless examples of church members – those in my host families as well as others – engaging in spontaneous, voluntary Bible Study. Whenever I strolled around in Sahameloka, stopping for a visit at one of my Adventist friends' houses – perhaps on a rainy afternoon or during times when there was little agricultural work to be done – it was not unusual to find one of them studying the Bible alone or together with another member of the church. On one such occasion I encountered Papan' i Fredel and his nephew Ranary sitting on a bench outside Papan' i Fredel's house, both men bending their heads over their Bibles (see photograph 3). It turned out that they were involved in a discussion of a Bible passage which Papan' i Fredel had asked his nephew, who was well versed in Biblical matters, to clarify to him. One particular occasion of someone engaging in Bible study on the spur of the moment is, however, especially memorable to me.



photograph 3: Papan' i Fredel (left) and his nephew studying, Sahameloka

On a weekend in April, I went along with some members of the Adventist church in Maroantsetra to a nearby village where they wanted to proselytise. We all slept in the village's old school, on the floor. By 9 o'clock, everyone seemed to be asleep except for Papan' i Lorica, a man of about thirty. He had lit a candle and sat there by himself brooding over his Bible and Study Guide, taking notes. Papan' i Lorica does not read easily. His reading is slow and cumbersome, and he struggles to get meaning out of the letters in front of him. Nevertheless, he continued to study for three-and-a-half hours, till after midnight, when he finally blew out his candle and lay down to sleep.

### **Studying and learning in church**

In both Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, there are several Adventist church services in the course of a week, namely on Wednesday and Friday evening, lasting for about an hour, and on the Sabbath, from morning till sunset with a break at lunchtime<sup>7</sup>. Although Adventist church services follow a ritualised sequence – specifying when to pray, when to sing, when to say what sort of thing, when to stand up and when to kneel – during any service there is also space to discuss things, or to put forward questions or one's opinion on a particular matter for anyone who wishes to do so. On the Sabbath, however, there are particular times specially designated for learning, studying and discussion.

### **Sabbath School**

In Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, the Sabbath morning service normally lasts for about three hours – in town often a bit longer, in the village a bit less – with variation according to the program; baptism for example considerably increases the length of a service. The Sabbath morning service consists of two central parts, with additional features and activities such as praying, singing and sharing testimony taking place before, in between, and after these. The first central part is what Seventh-day Adventists call Sabbath School (*Ecole du Sabbat*, *Sekoly Sabbata*); the second part is the *culte*,

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<sup>7</sup> Strictly speaking, Friday evening is already part of the Sabbath since for Seventh-day Adventists, the day ends after sunset. However, in what follows I am going to use the term Sabbath to refer to Saturday.

including the sermon, which I will briefly come back to later. The significance of Sabbath School is one of the central pillars of Seventh-day Adventism world-wide and has been a focus since the beginning of the movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, approximately forty-five minutes are dedicated to the *Sekoly Sabbata* (Sabbath School).

The purpose of Sabbath School is to discuss the lessons of the past week, as set out in the Bible Study Guide. As I explained above, the seven lessons of the week relate to a specific topic, and form a chapter as a whole. Every weekly chapter contains a number of questions, and it is these which the members of the church jointly explore during Sabbath School, exchanging their interpretations of the text, discussing their respective points of view, citing Biblical verses as evidence for their opinion and weaving their own experiences into their expositions. While the congregation in Maroantsetra is, for the purpose of Sabbath School, divided into groups of ten to fifteen persons<sup>8</sup>, no such division is necessary in Sahameloka. In every discussion group one participant, in most cases a man<sup>9</sup>, acts as ‘class teacher’ (called *moniteur*<sup>10</sup>)<sup>11</sup>. The job of the class teacher is first and foremost to guide the discussion and to encourage everyone to participate, but also to make sure that the most relevant points (previously discussed with the other *moniteurs*) are not missed out. Class teachers are, however, clearly not encouraged to deliver a monologue or to *lecture* people about Biblical truth. The purpose of Sabbath School is for all participants to exchange ideas, opinions and interpretations of what they have read over the week at home, and to possibly develop in group discussion a common understanding of the past week’s chapter. The members of the church are encouraged to reflect and ponder, to make creative contributions and to form their own opinion on a given matter. Many people have both Bible and Study Guide at

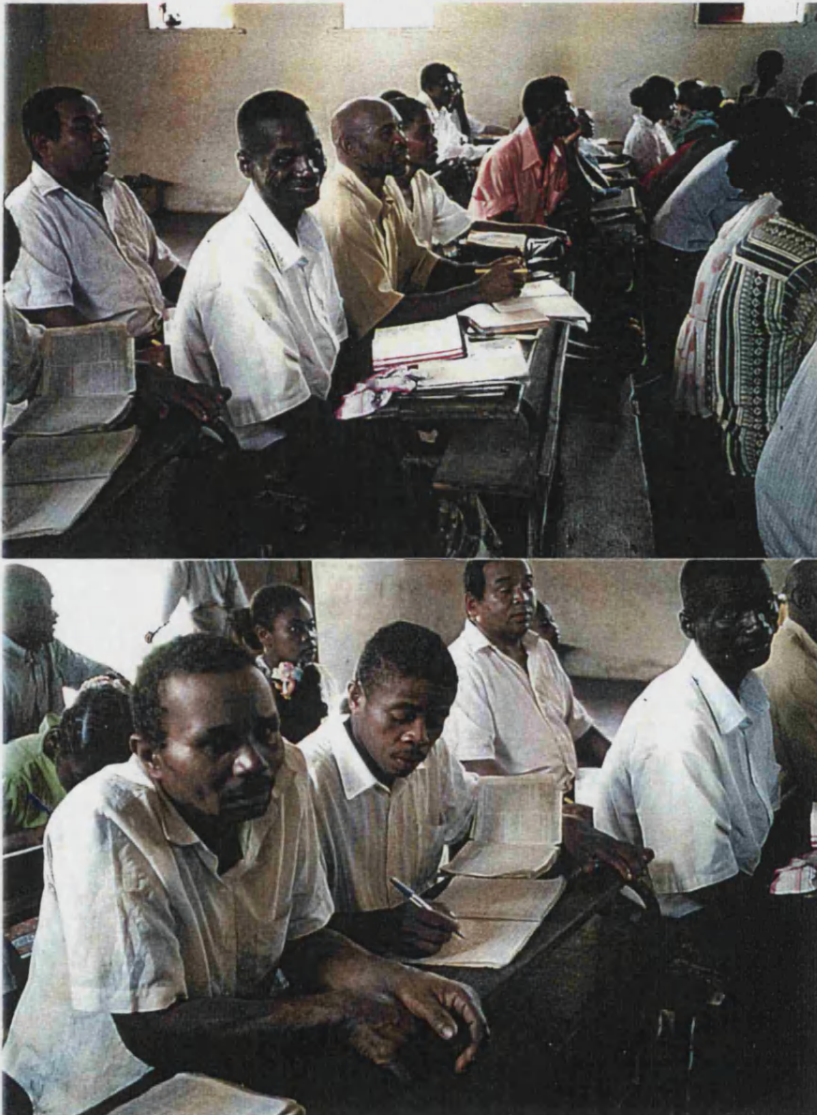
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<sup>8</sup> People who happen to sit close to each other (there is no institutionalised seating-order in Maroantsetra, but men and women, old and young sit wherever they like) spontaneously form a Sabbath School group. Depending on the number of those present, there are between 5-10 such groups on an average Sabbath. However, it sometimes happens that the congregation is not divided into groups; in such cases, the discussion tends to be less animated and participatory.

<sup>9</sup> Although certain offices (pastor, lay leader) and duties are only open to men (and in the case of chairing Sabbath School to the wives or widows of a pastor), and although the Seventh-day Adventist *doctrine* is patriarchal, Adventist practice at home and in church is characterised by remarkable gender-egalitarianism in my fieldsites, as I already mentioned in chapter 4.

<sup>10</sup> See chapter 4: 109.

hand, and some take notes of particularly important points, or of Biblical references, on a flimsy piece of paper or in a school exercise book, or they may underline a paragraph in their Bible which they consider especially significant (see photographs 4 and 5 below [from a Sabbath School which was not divided into groups]).



photographs 4 and 5: people studying during Sabbath School, Maroantsetra

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<sup>11</sup> In Sahameloka, it was almost always one of the elected church leaders who led Sabbath



During Sabbath School, people's body language, as well as their verbal participation, spoke volumes. Often I observed people lean forward when listening to what someone else said, cupping their chin in their hands. Or they would fix their gaze on a speaker, and then on another who responded to the first, and then another, without losing concentration, not noticing that they were being observed themselves.

The atmosphere during Sabbath School is informal and free of strict discipline, and everyone present can speak anytime they please. People often spontaneously take on and continue the argument of the previous speaker, or else criticise it and express a different view. Indeed, I was often reminded of university seminars while sitting in Sabbath School both in town and in the village. Some issues were hotly debated, and, in such cases, there was not one final answer to the question at stake. Once, for example, the participants in a study group I attended discussed whether or not the Sabbath *predated* Creation. Had God created the Sabbath specifically for the needs of us humans, or was it a divine institution independent of us? Several people took a very lively interest in this question and debated the pros and cons of either view, citing appropriate passages from the Book of Genesis. No final answer had been established when the little bell rang to indicate the end of Sabbath School<sup>12</sup>.

I think I can convey the atmosphere of Sabbath School best by actually quoting one discussion at length and in detail. It is the 25<sup>th</sup> December 1999; since Seventh-day Adventists do not agree with the alleged date of Jesus' birth, it is a Sabbath like any other. The study group I join consists of ten participants between the ages of 18 and about 50. By chance they are all men, except for me (most groups are gender-mixed). I am attending and recording the discussion without actively taking part. Eight of the ten men present make at least one active contribution in the course of the discussion, many, several. One of them acts as class teacher. The other participants, I have numbered according to the sitting order.

Before I reproduce their discussion that morning, however, I need to briefly explain one aspect of Seventh-day Adventist doctrine which is referred to several times.

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School, while there was more variation in town.

<sup>12</sup> As both Lehmann (1998: 617-621) and Bruce (2000: 98) have pointed out, and as I mentioned in chapter 4, the 'fundamentalist' approach to the study of Holy Scriptures in fact denies authoritative interpretation.

According to Seventh-day Adventist prophecy, there is a known sequence of events which will eventually lead to Christ's second coming, the millennium and life in Paradise thereafter. One of these events is what Seventh-day Adventists call 'The Sunday law' (*ny lalanan' ny Alahady*). The Sunday law, which, it is believed, will come into force shortly before Christ's return to earth, refers to a world-wide prohibition on worshipping God on any day other than Sunday under threat of severe punishment. Thus the Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka expect to be persecuted in the not too distant future, as – Papan' i Beby once explained to me – the prophet Daniel had foretold more than 2000 years ago: "... And he [the Pope] shall speak great words against the most High, and shall wear out the saints of the most High [the Adventists being persecuted for keeping the Sabbath], and think to change times and laws [the introduction of the Sunday law] ..." (Daniel 7: 25). It is the time of persecution under the Sunday law that the participants in the discussion below often refer to as 'the difficult times' when their faith will be truly tested.

The discussion of 25<sup>th</sup> December 1999 begins after a brief introduction by the teacher, a man in his thirties<sup>13</sup>. Before the actual Sabbath School begins, five or ten minutes are reserved for people to share testimonies (personal experiences with 'a message' so to speak) or anything they consider relevant<sup>14</sup>.

Number 10 (a man in his late twenties):

"I have noticed that many Adventists are changing these days. Even those who used to do things which were not really proper, are now preparing themselves for the difficulties of the last days. For example, many Adventists are getting married these days. We should follow the laws of God as he gave them to the Israelites. He was very strict at that time and it is still the same God. One has to return to worship on the Sabbath, only then can one be sure to go to Heaven. God told the Israelites not to cook on the Sabbath, and that's what we should be doing to this day. Immediately after sunset on Friday, we ought to go to church, we shouldn't wait till a particular time such as 6.30 to meet in church,

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<sup>13</sup> The following extract is based on a transcription focussing on content rather than linguistic detail.

<sup>14</sup> In order to give the reader a sense of the level of participation by various members of this particular Sabbath School discussion group, I will indicate the number of contributions made by each one of them.

but we should go immediately after sunset, because that is the beginning of the Sabbath. That is what I plan to do from the beginning of next year.”

Number 7 (Kiki, on holiday from his studies in Toamasina):

“In Toamasina, we go to school on Saturdays, too, and almost all exams are held on Saturdays. And I said to my teacher that I couldn’t take exams on Saturday, because I am an Adventist and that I would under all circumstances always go to church on the Sabbath. He replied that there were other Adventists at our school who sit exams on Saturday, which is true. He said I was just a troublemaker and that I was lazy. But I replied that I didn’t try to cause problems and that I wasn’t lazy, but that I was an Adventist and that I would always go to church on a Saturday. And I said that I’d prefer to fail the exams [*mahazo zero*] rather than to sit them on a Sabbath. He said, well then, you’ll fail. That is my testimony which I also told my classmates.”

Number 8 (a young man):

“We all know that Christ’s return is imminent. But some church members have suggested that we should all leave our homes and hide in the forest [waiting for the persecution to start]. And I have heard of some living further north who have in fact sold all their property and are just waiting for Christ’s return. But that is wrong, because God doesn’t tell us to sell our things, to prepare materially, but to prepare our spirit for Christ’s return. Those who sell their wealth are concerned with ‘matters of the flesh’ [*ara-nofa*], but one should only bother with ‘matters of the spirit’ [*ara-panahy*]. We should prepare our spirits, because during the difficult times, we may die, and therefore it’s more important to prepare spiritually.”

Number 2 (a man of about fifty who works as a mechanic):

“It’s like with time: The clock won’t turn twelve if it hasn’t turned eleven yet; and it won’t turn eleven before it turns ten. Similarly, we must pass through many stages before the return of Christ. Some Adventists say that Jesus may return tomorrow, but nobody knows exactly when He will return. We only know that we have to pass certain stages prior to that. The spirit of prophecy is our *radar*. There are always clouds prior to the rain. The reason why those Adventists in the countryside who sell their things are

wrong is that they don't understand the spirit of prophecy. We first have to wait for the Sunday law. At the moment, they [the Pope and others] are not fierce yet, but they encourage people to pray on Sunday. The wages of civil servants working on Saturday, for example, will rise at the beginning of the New Year [thus tempting them to ignore the Holy Sabbath]. We all have to make decisions and we have to prepare ourselves for the difficult times."

At this point, the little bell rings to indicate the beginning of Sabbath School proper. Before we start, however, we kneel down for a prayer. Then the teacher begins with a reminder of the subject of this week's chapter and then calls on everyone present to quote any Bible verse they may have learnt by heart this week; several people recite. Then the discussion begins<sup>15</sup>. After every contribution, the teacher thanks the speaker for his contribution (an example of Malagasy communication skills<sup>16</sup>).

Teacher:

"Our new lesson is about the Heavenly Family. We start by discussing the first lesson: 'Citizens of a New Community'; what does that mean?"

Number 3 (a man in his forties):

"Our community [*fiaraha-monina*] here on earth is already in a really bad state [*efa ke*]. Because everything is full of sin. But the new community [*fiaraha-monina vaovao*] in Heaven will be good. There won't be any fights, life will be full of joy. There won't be either illness or death."

Number 8 (second contribution):

"Some people think, but that is wrong, that when we are dead, we go to some invisible life and join an invisible community [Seventh-day Adventists reject the idea of a spiritual afterlife]. But nobody has any idea as to what this invisible life is like. One can't say anything about it. But the new community where we will go is completely

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<sup>15</sup> This Sabbath School discussion concerns the week which contains the lesson reproduced at the beginning of this chapter.



different. One can know what it will be like. We will see everything with our own eyes [*hita maso*] just like we see things in the here and now.”

Number 10 (second contribution):

“We speak here about life in Paradise. The Bible says that there is no sin there, but here on earth, we still commit many sins. We are used to sinful [dirty] life here on earth. But it is those who are already used to a good lifestyle according to the Bible who will go to Paradise. One should live according to the Bible so that one is already used to the new life in Paradise. Because those who will be used to this good life already here on earth will be those who go to Heaven.”

Number 9 (a man in his early thirties):

“These days there are two kinds of communities; both have their ways. One is our community here on earth, the other is the community with God. The community with God is an image of life in Heaven. The lesson leads us towards this new life we should already learn about while on earth. Those who are not used to the ways of the new life while still on earth, won’t be able to live there. For example, if someone is used to drinking alcohol, they won’t be able to live there. They will go and look for alcohol and they will suffer [since there won’t be any]. But there, there will be nothing which makes you suffer. This is my view on the new community.”

Number 2 (second contribution):

“It is as though one of us went to France. If we didn’t speak French, we wouldn’t be able to live there well. Therefore, we would have to learn French before we went to prepare ourselves. And so it is with Heaven. Those who want to go to Heaven have to learn the language of Heaven whilst still on earth. Otherwise, they won’t be prepared.”

Teacher

“We don’t have to look far. Look at Eva who is with us. Well, she learnt Malagasy before she came here, didn’t she, because she knew she was going to come to

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<sup>16</sup> The style of discussion bears a certain resemblance to traditional oratory styles for which the

Madagascar and so she learnt our language. When we talk about the new community, we are not talking about other people, but about ourselves. What the lesson teaches us is that we are here on earth only temporarily, we just pass by, but we will go to Heaven and live there forever. We are like people who build their house of palm tree material rather than cement, because they know they will soon move. That's why we already study now and learn the ways of the new life so that when we arrive there [in Paradise], we won't have any problems."

Number 2 (the mechanic, third contribution):

"What one can know for sure is this. It's like with someone who makes a motor [*mpanao moteur*]. They know what is good for it. A motor who needs diesel [*gasoile*] may stop working if it is fed petrol [*essence*]. Similarly, God knows what is good for us. He tells us in the Bible what is good for us, because he made us and so he knows. For example concerning the food which is taboo to eat [*zava-pady*]. What is good for our health is written in the Bible. We Adventists are very healthy, because we don't eat the things God tells us not to. All doctors agree that the Adventists are healthier than other people and that they recover very quickly when they fall ill. Why is that? Because we don't eat things that God tells us not to. That's my contribution [*soso-kevitra*<sup>17</sup>]."

Teacher:

"My wife was hospitalised recently to have an operation. The doctor asked us which church we belonged to. When we told him that we were Adventists, he said, before he had operated on her, that she would be going home in seven days at the latest. Well, she was operated on Wednesday and on Friday she already left the hospital. (...) We don't rest on rotten wood, but on good, healthy wood. Let's read in Isaiah 35: 5-10. That's where we can read about the truth of the new life. Who would like to read?"

Everyone picks up their Bible and Number 4 (a middle-aged man who I do not know) who has up to now been silent, volunteers and reads the verses slowly and with

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Malagasy are famous (see Bloch 1975, Keenan 1975, Cole 2001: 181-185).

some difficulty. The text tells of the beauty of life in Heaven, free of illness, sorrow or pain.

Number 2 (fourth contribution):

“One doesn’t enter the house if one isn’t clean. And God tells us not to care for dead bodies, because they are dirty. When people die, then their bodies inevitably get dirty [rot]. If we wear clean clothes, but then go somewhere dirty, we get dirty. That’s how I see it. And God says that those who are not clean won’t enter the new life. The first thing we have to do is to keep the taboos God has given us. And what concerns our health, we must not eat tabooed food.”

Teacher:

“Health is happiness. When we read the Bible, we see that those who are blind will see [in Paradise], the dumb will sing and the weak walk.”

Number 3 (second contribution):

“My contribution concerns the same topic. There are people whose clothes and shoes may be clean, but their spirit is dirty. But what is necessary is a clean life style. Do we all understand that? [confirmation by the others]. What really bothers people are illnesses. Whether rich or poor, if they are ill, they cannot be happy. If someone rich is constantly ill, they are less happy than someone poor who is not often ill. The greatest joy in Heaven is health. It is us Adventists who have the greatest access to health. We drink a lot of water, we don’t eat shrimps or pork, we don’t eat dirty animals.”

Number 4 (first contribution):

“We should learn already here on earth the things which are right and those which are not. For example, I easily get angry. That means that I will also get angry easily in Heaven if I don’t learn not to. But in Heaven there are no fierce lions.”

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<sup>17</sup> The question “Does anybody have any suggestions?” (*Misy soso-kevitra?*) is very often used by the ‘teacher’ both when people study at home, and in church, to call on everyone present to express their own view on the topic at issue.

Not everyone seems to be clear what he means. Number 9 helps.

Number 9 (second contribution):

“What he means concerning the lions is that in the new life there is nothing fierce, for example no fierce lions, no fierce animals, and there are no violent people either, he says. But if we are used to being fierce, it will be difficult there. We must look at our own lives and if we see something which is not according to the Bible, then we must try to change that. That is what he means.”

Number 4 (second contribution):

“Yes, for example it happens that one forgets one’s watch somewhere, but the person who finds it doesn’t return it to its owner. Even within this very house [the church] things are stolen [very]. And church members still fight over land. And there are even people who come to church on Saturday, but in the evening they do *tromba* [spirit possession].”

Several people: “That is true!”

Teacher:

“I would like to say something. It is like with a competition. If one doesn’t know what the first and second prizes are, people will hesitate to take part. But if they know what they will get, they will rush to take part as well. If they know that the first prize is a bicycle [VTT], then everyone will want to take part. You see, it is just like that with us knowing what is waiting for us in Paradise, for example that the blind will see, the deaf will hear and that we will see God sitting there. But it is not really that the blind will see and the weak will become strong which is so fantastic about this place there [Paradise], but that we will see God living together with us [*hitantsika Zanahary*]. [Number 2: Yes, that’s exactly right!] What we have long been wondering about is: what is Jesus really like? What are his hands like which had the nails in them? What is God’s life like? And what is His name? We will carry His name just as you now [pointing to someone wearing a T-shirt which says Ronaldo] carry the name Ronaldo on your shirt. All of that we will see there! Any suggestions?”

Number 2 (fifth contribution):

“Yes, what I would like to say is this. Moses really wished to see God [*Zanahary*]. God [*Andriamanitra*] said to him: Nobody who will see my face will be lost. I will show you my glory. Moses was sitting at the bottom of two big stones, but when God passed by, he shone with light. The Israelites couldn’t bear looking at him.”

Number 8 (third contribution):

“Many people were blind at the time of Jesus, but not those who were close to Him. Those who were close to Him, He healed. Here on earth there are still many ill people, because we are not yet physically close to God. But when we will be there [in Paradise], nobody will be ill anymore.”

Teacher:

“We won’t see all of this before we arrive there. Only there will we see it all. None of this will happen before what happens? Before Jesus comes back. When he comes back, all people will see Him, but not everyone will be happy [those who won’t be saved won’t be happy].”

Number 9 (third contribution):

“Those who have no holiness [*tsy manan-pahamasinana*], won’t see the Lord. And they should start today to ask for forgiveness [*mibebaka*]. They should ask for forgiveness for all their sins and all the bad things they have done. First of all, one must know God’s character. Second, one can only know His character if one studies His word. Therefore, one must study the Bible, the lessons, the prophecy and act accordingly. And one must proselytize so that other people know what it will be like in Heaven and about the conditions to go there.”

Number 8 (fourth contribution):

“I would like to make a suggestion which I have been thinking about because of the New Year. I sell clothes in the countryside. As soon as I arrive anywhere, the children’s clothes are sold out, because the parents want their children to have nice clothes for New Year. But for themselves they don’t get anything. The parents only think of their

children. But what about themselves? Where are the clothes they buy for themselves? I think that's wrong. And one must not do it like that with religion [*fivavahana*]. For example, if I only think about Kola [his son], but don't think about my own life and what I have to do in order to go to Heaven myself, then what about me? The basis of all our lessons concerning the return of Christ is the story of the ten virgins (Matthew 25: 1-13). Whenever we talk about Christ's return, we read this story. There are five clever [*hendry*] ones, and five stupid ones [*adala*]. And the clever ones look after themselves and don't rack their brains about the stupid ones. Each of them just thinks about herself. That is why I don't think about other people's lives. My own life still needs sorting out, so, should I really care about other people? The preparations to go to Heaven are not like having a party [*fety*]. Sometimes one loses time thinking about other people."

Several people disagree.

Number 10 to the previous speaker (third contribution):

"Don't you remember Cain and Abel? God asked Cain "Where is your brother?", but Cain replied that he wasn't the guardian of his brother. What this meant was that he didn't care about his brother. But that's wrong [*tsy azo atao*]."

Teacher:

"Cain didn't understand."

Number 9 (fourth contribution):

"No, he didn't understand. God of course already knew that Cain had killed his brother. But he wanted to see whether Cain would repent or not. That is why He asked him. Not because He didn't know."

Someone asks the speaker to repeat his contribution, which he does. Then number 2 makes another contribution.

Number 2 (sixth contribution):

“The lesson is here to help us to apply what we are taught. We know perfectly well that we must follow God in everything. But do we really do so? That is the question which matters. We have learnt many lessons, but will we also apply what we have learnt? That is the crucial question.”

Teacher:

Does anyone have any suggestions concerning this?

Everyone talks at once.

Number 9 (fifth contribution):

“That’s what our brother meant [Number 8 talking about the ten virgins]. It is because we really need to look closely at our own lives that this is no longer the time to go and convince other people, but to prepare one’s own mind for Christ’s return, because it is very close. Jesus is already knocking at the door.”

Number 3 (third contribution):

“Let’s read Matthew 24: 44. [Everyone finds the passage in their Bible.] ‘Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh’. What can we learn from this? We must not think that Jesus will not come back for a long time yet. If we think that, we don’t prepare ourselves properly. And then we won’t be ready when he comes, but we will be surprised by his sudden arrival. It’s like with a burglar. One doesn’t know when a burglar comes and so, one must be prepared at any moment. We don’t know the day and time of Christ’s return. (...) Daniel prayed three times every day, and we should pray even more often. It all depends on us.”

Number 4 (third contribution):

“We mustn’t be surprised by Christ’s return. There is a book written by Ratrema William I think he was called, about a man who had a gardener [*jardinier*]. His master went away for two years, but his gardener continued doing his work every day. Everyone told him he was crazy, since he was working while his ‘patron’ was away. But he replied

that he didn't know when his 'patron' would return and so he just continued doing his work. People thought him crazy. But firstly, he was paid to care for the garden, and so he did. Secondly, when his 'patron' returned, he was very pleased with the gardener. What we can learn from this story is that we must be prepared [*parê*] for Christ's return at all times."

Teacher:

"I would like to thank everyone for their suggestions. What the lesson teaches us is simple. Jesus will come back for certain, but we don't know when, and so we must prepare ourselves. We must pray and wait for him, so that we will go to the new life in Heaven. Our government is in Heaven. God give us strength, Amen."

Everyone: Amen.

In my experience, the above example is representative of the character and style of Sabbath School discussions in Maroantsetra as well as in Sahameloka. However, it would be misleading to imagine that all discussions are always as lively as the one I have just quoted. Indeed, while listening to the participants, I had the impression that they were spurred on by my taping the discussion; everyone wanted to 'go to Europe' if only on a tape.

In fact, there is quite a lot of variety in terms of people's active participation in Sabbath School discussions, depending on several aspects. Individual participation often depends on literacy. In particular old women are often almost or entirely illiterate and they rarely make active contributions during Sabbath School discussions. Hence, if a discussion group has a lot of old women in it, it tends not to be very animated. Similarly, if a teacher speaks in a more complicated manner than most people can understand, or if he is keen to display his own expertise, the discussion tends to be less engaged. A single enthusiastic participant, in contrast, may trigger a discussion, which then gains momentum and involves many people. But other aspects, too, such as the general morale of the congregation – itself depending on a variety of aspects – can have a noticeable effect on the atmosphere, and the enthusiasm with which people engage in Sabbath School discussions. But even if at times the participants of a study group do not succeed



in producing a lively discussion, the leitmotiv of any Sabbath School is to encourage intellectual engagement of church members with Biblical text rather than indoctrination of truth. And the emphasis always lies on comprehension, rather than reproduction of Biblical truth. Most Saturdays, not only is this leitmotiv enacted, it is precisely this active participation which church members seem to *enjoy* most.

On rare occasions, the actual content of what is discussed during Sabbath School is of a really scholarly nature, in the sense that the focus lies on subtle distinctions and definitions of particular terms. In such situations, the atmosphere is slightly different and more of a lecture by someone with exceptional expertise than a discussion amongst equals. I witnessed two such instances.

Once, different kinds of Biblical texts – namely poems, symbols, allegories, parables and types (using the French terms) – were at issue. The point of the week's chapter was to understand the distinction between these different forms of Biblical narrative. Papan' i Beby, who on this occasion was the teacher (few others would have been able to give this particular explanation), explained that rising smoke, for instance, could be a 'symbol' of prayer ascending to Heaven. The character of a 'parable', in contrast, he illustrated by way of the story told in Matthew 13: 3-9 in which "a sower went forth to sow", but his seeds fell on ground of various quality and only those that fell on fertile earth actually produced grain. The most difficult kind of narrative, which, however, fascinated Papan' i Beby, was the 'type'. A 'type' in Adventist discourse is a story or character which foreshadows its own full realization, called its 'anti-type'. The sacrifice of animals in the Old Testament, for instance, is a 'type' of Christ's crucifixion. Because in both cases, Papan' i Beby's explanation went on, there is an exchange of death for life. Equally, Abraham's son Isaac, nearly burnt alive by his father at God's command, is a 'type' of Jesus Christ, because in both Isaac's and Jesus' case, a father sacrifices (or is willing to sacrifice) his own son. For Seventh-day Adventists, the Old and the New Testament are equally important, and church members in my fieldsites always emphasised that one must not neglect the one for the other. Biblical narratives using 'types' and 'anti-types' were seen as proof of the fact that the Bible was one coherent whole. This many more members understood than the definition of what

exactly a 'type' was, which, I am quite sure, remained unclear to many of Papan' i Beby's listeners.

The second instance of a Sabbath School discussion of such a scholarly nature that I witnessed concerned the difference between what was referred to in the Bible Study Guide as *âme* and *esprit*. Unfortunately, both are translated by the same Malagasy word (*fanahy*) and thus the distinction this particular lesson elaborated upon, employing the French expressions *âme* and *esprit*, caused considerable confusion with its Malagasy students.

What I have discussed so far are Sabbath School discussions amongst adults, that is among people of the age of 16 and over (called *Jeunesse Adventiste* [Adventist Youth]). Those aged 10 to 15 (the so-called *explorateurs*, *explos* for short) have their own Bible Study Guide, specifically written for these younger members. While the adults hold their Sabbath School inside the church, the *explos* meet elsewhere to discuss their own text which they have studied over the week. I only occasionally attended these meetings, but the couple of times I did, I had the impression that the leitmotiv of these teenage Sabbath Schools was very much the same as amongst the adults. Although one or two adult members of the church were present and partly led the program, most of the meeting was actually run by *explos* themselves and active participation was encouraged as among the adult congregation. While teenagers and adults hold Sabbath School, the little *aventuriers*, aged 6 to 9, learn a new song which they will later proudly perform for the whole congregation.

### The culte

The second central part of a Sabbath morning is the *culte*, whose core is the sermon. As I discussed in chapter 4, the sermon is not necessarily delivered by the pastor, and the *culte* always involves the participation of many church members. However, what I wish to emphasise here is that although, unlike Sabbath School, the sermon is not a time for discussion and active participation of all church members, it is nevertheless a time for study for many. I often observed how people took notes while listening to the sermon, mostly writing down the Biblical references mentioned by the speaker, so as to enable them to study the sermon in more detail later at home. This is precisely what Claude or

Kiki were doing when I sometimes found them absorbed in Bible study. The sermon is often rather lengthy, depending on the speaker, and the *culte* involves a number of ritualised features such as particular prayers and songs. The end of the *culte* marks the end of Sabbath morning and people go home for lunch.

#### Playful learning on Sabbath afternoon

Like the morning of the Sabbath, the afternoon service follows a ritualised sequence and basically consists of two parts: ‘the time of the grown ups’ (*ny fotoanan’ ny lehibe*) and ‘the time of the young’ (*ny fotoanan’ ny tanora*), which each last roughly one hour. As during the morning, the emphasis lies on Bible study, but on Sabbath afternoon, it is conducted in a more fun-oriented and playful manner.

#### *Sahameloka, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2000*

We are witnessing ‘the time of the grown ups’, dedicated to improving the Biblical expertise of the adult members of the church in Sahameloka.

First, Vangé, an eighteen-year-old member of the church, steps forward and poses the question to the assembled congregation as to whether it is proper to do such things as cooking or plaiting hair on the Sabbath. A lively discussion evolves; everyone feels concerned; pros and cons are discussed and Vangé keenly writes down what is argued and the Biblical passages which support the claims made. The discussion continues for some twenty minutes.

Then, as on many other Sabbath afternoons both in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, a quiz testing people’s Bible expertise, is on the agenda. One of the members of the village congregation has put together a series of questions. Everyone is called to join the quiz. Six people, equipped with their Bibles, line up at the front of the church ready to be challenged. The first question is asked: “How many years did the Israelites live in Egypt prior to their exodus?” The participants, and many people in the audience, quickly and keenly start to browse through the Bible. They all know that the answer is somewhere in Exodus, and some of them seem to have a clear idea which chapter must contain the information. As though in an exam, they try to cheat a little by glancing to their left and right to see whether one of their co-competitors has already succeeded in finding the relevant passage. Soon enough, one of them indeed finds it, and

after whispering the correct answer into the ear of the leader of the quiz, the young man goes back to his place smiling proudly. The other participants are given some more time to find the passage, but since none of them succeed, the right answer – 430 years – is declared, and everyone present is called upon to memorise the information. Then the next question is asked: “At what age was Ellen White baptised?” Everyone starts guessing; again, it is a difficult question to which, in the end, the organiser of the game has to give the answer. The quiz continues: “Find a passage in the Bible (*toko sy andininy*) which explicitly speaks of *finoana* (trust/belief).” This time, several people succeed in finding a relevant Bible verse quite quickly. Other questions follow. In the end, all participants have managed to find the right answer to at least one question despite the difficulty of this afternoon’s quiz. And so, ‘the time of the young’ begins.

While in Maroantsetra town, ‘the time of the young’ is mainly a matter of children of different ages producing a song or reciting Bible verses they have learnt by heart; in Sahameloka, and sometimes also in Maroantsetra, it is very much geared towards young church members acquiring expertise in Biblical matters. And it is obvious that those involved take great joy in learning and pride in knowing.

#### *Sahameloka, 18<sup>th</sup> December 1999*

First, it is the turn of the little *aventuriers*. Given their young age and limited experience in Biblical matters, they are asked easy questions such as: “In which chapter of the Bible is the creation of the world described?”, or “What was the name of the person who led the people of Israel out of Egypt?”. Those who do not know the answer to any of these questions can instead sing a song or recite any Bible verse they know by heart – often they recite Genesis 1:1 in that situation – and thus win the right to sit back with their mates without being exposed as ignorant.

Then it is the turn of the *explos* who are challenged with questions as difficult as those for the adult members of the church. “At what age was Jesus baptised?” Several participants give it a try, but they have to know the exact age. “How is the Adventist church organized from the international down to the local level?” One fifteen-year old boy can, to everyone’s surprise and joy at this exhibition of real expertise, list all levels of the church’s organisation right from top to bottom (General Conference, divisions, unions, missions, federations and so on) only confusing two of them. The quiz

continues: “Which verses in which chapter describe the Holy Communion?” This belongs to the standard stock of knowledge of many teenage Adventists and so they open their Bibles at 1 Corinthians: 11 without hesitation and quickly find the relevant passage.

*Maroantsetra, 15<sup>th</sup> May 1999*

A quiz is organised for the *explos* in Maroantsetra town. The questions focus on Moses: “What is the name of the river where Moses was abandoned in a basket?” “What does the name Moses mean?” “What was Moses’ wife called?” The participants have to find not only the right answers to these questions, but also the exact passages in the Bible which contain the relevant information. There is a lot of whispering and browsing through the Bible in the audience as well as amongst the participants, and not all questions can be answered satisfactorily.

On one occasion on a Sabbath in Maroantsetra, two *children* organised the afternoon’s quiz. First a six-year old boy put Biblical questions to a group of adults who had volunteered as participants. Those who failed to come up with the correct answer, the little boy had sing a song. Partly because the adults hardly knew anything, and partly because of the peculiar reversal of roles, this quiz produced a lot of laughter. Then a group of *explos* was challenged in a similar way by a twelve-year-old.

This is perhaps a good moment to point out that Adventist practice in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka is not always just a matter of serious Bible study. People have fun, as in some of the anecdotes I have used in this chapter. People want to learn, but they also want to enjoy themselves, and so church services are often broken up by ‘light’ parts such as a quiz which, apart from being aimed at improving people’s Bible expertise, is also good entertainment and often produces a lot of giggling and laughter. On two occasions when I was present, members of the congregation in Maroantsetra performed a sketch in church. One imitated the customs of different ethnic groups of Madagascar – the performers were dressed up in ‘ethnic costumes’; the other related to issues of poverty and corruption.

Also, it is important to recognise the joy and happiness people find in their involvement in the church. The atmosphere in church often seemed to abound with such emotions when people were singing, which they love to do, and do incredibly well. But

one occasion is particularly memorable to me, on which I went along with a large group of Adventists from Maroantsetra to spend the Sabbath in one of the district's villages. We were transported in the trailer of a tractor and had much fun chugging along the bumpy road, and sang church songs loudly and happily all the way there, and back.

As with Sabbath School in the morning, the character of learning spaces on Sabbath afternoon can be much determined by contributions of just one or two individuals. The following account is an example.

*Ampoafana, 13<sup>th</sup> May 2000, a sector (organisational level above a single congregation) meeting including the congregation in Sahameloka*

Only about a hundred persons are present, which is few for such a meeting. After a relatively quiet morning, during which not many people actively participate, Sabbath afternoon once again comes to acquire a real study atmosphere when someone asks the following question: 'Satan, so the Bible says, will forever burn in the Great Fire. At the same time though, the Bible says that after the final resurrection, there will be no space for *any suffering* at all in Paradise. So, where is there space in Paradise for a suffering devil?' 'This is a very good question', the church leader in charge of the afternoon's program replies; and he goes on to explain that the expression 'eternal' did not mean that Satan will burn forever, but that the *consequences* of the final resurrection will last eternally, i.e. that the destruction of Evil will be final. The answer satisfies the young man's thirst for understanding, but several other people are now inspired to ask their own questions regarding points of doctrine they are not clear about and which they seek to have explained to them. Thanks to the initiative of one person, the atmosphere had completely changed.

Sabbath afternoon is also a time when anyone who wishes to can perform a song, or demonstrate their expertise, or make some other kind of contribution. Once, for example, in Sahameloka, a young man came forward during 'the time of the grown ups' and read two different Bible texts which he had chosen and practised at home. Though he read very slowly and a couple of times got stuck with a particular passage, which he had to spell out, he really made an effort and he had obviously also made a private effort

at home, practising reading these texts. The audience appreciated this effort and applauded. On another occasion, Momont, the pastor's brother-in-law, read a poem about landscape that he had written himself.

It can also happen that members with an extraordinarily high level of Bible expertise show off. During the above *secteur* meeting for example, one of the day's leaders gave a lengthy explanation about the dreams of the prophet Daniel. His speech included references to the Romans, the Persians and the Greeks of whom, I am quite sure, almost nobody else had ever heard before in their life. The lecturer, however, took pride in displaying his expertise.

#### Spaces for learning throughout the week

During the Sabbath, as we have seen, many spaces are specifically designated for Bible study and learning. However, during services held on Wednesday and Friday evenings as well, there is always space to discuss things, or to put forward questions or one's opinion on a particular matter for anyone who wishes to do so.

Once on a Wednesday evening in Maroantsetra for instance, Maman' i Luc – a woman of about forty – stepped forward and opened a discussion about a passage she had come across, but which had remained unclear to her, when reading a book by Ellen White. Similarly on another day in church, Hery, a teenage boy, presented the congregation with the question of whether or not God had also created Darkness. If not, where did Darkness come from? He had become confused about this issue when studying the first chapter of the Book of Genesis at home and was eager to have it clarified.

On Wednesday evenings, the program in Maroantsetra town normally includes the person in charge reading from one of Ellen White's books and offering some interpretations as to the relevance of the text. One such evening, however, Razaka, the town's youngest church leader who was in charge of the program that day, had decided to turn the evening's 'lecture' into a 'workshop-seminar'. Thus he split up those present into four groups of six to ten persons. He then allocated each group a particular passage of the chapter by Ellen White he had chosen, and then asked each group to first read and discuss the text amongst themselves. After some twenty minutes of discussion, the different groups were asked to appoint one or two speakers, who then summarised the

previous group discussions for the audience. The pastor, sitting among the ordinary church members and joining one of the discussion groups, was as much taken by surprise by Razaka's spontaneous change of program as everybody else.

On another occasion, it was the pastor who employed an unusual teaching method. As part of a district meeting which had attracted several hundred Adventists from far-flung villages, he on Friday evening gave a speech on the difficulty of human communication, and the importance of avoiding misunderstandings due to the distortion of information. He referred in particular to the misunderstanding on the part of some members of the Adventist church that Christ would return *in the year 2000*. To prove his point, he produced a little experiment. He whispered a sentence into someone's ear and told that person to whisper what they had heard into the next person's ear and so forth. The fifth person he asked to repeat the sentence aloud. And indeed, so he claimed, the content had changed remarkably. Thus the Chinese whispers experiment had confirmed what the pastor then wrote on the blackboard, namely that only 20% of what is being said in human communication survives after having been passed on five times.

In chapter 5, I mentioned special events which last for about a week and which are held once or twice a year in the Seventh-day Adventist church in Maroantsetra. These are also learning spaces, in particular when they concern, as I think they often do, issues of health. Unfortunately, I do not have the space to discuss the issue of health in this thesis, which has played an important role within Adventism right from its beginning (see Numbers 1976) and which church members in Maroantsetra in particular, and to a lesser extent in Sahameloka, are very much interested in. What I wish to stress here is merely that these 'health seminars'<sup>18</sup> follow the same leitmotiv as Bible study in general, and Sabbath School in particular. During the 'health seminars' I attended, people took extensive notes on what they were being taught about healthy nutrition and the power of 'natural' medicine such as water or garlic, as well as foot massage. People copied drawings from the blackboard on which the teacher had drawn a foot and marked

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<sup>18</sup> Some of these are held every evening in the course of a week; some last just one afternoon (Sunday usually). Typically, they are held by a visiting member of the Adventist church from Madagascar's capital.



the points corresponding to particular organs<sup>19</sup>. On one occasion, a young man was asked to come to the front and to take off his shirt and his shoes. After he had done so, the teacher marked corresponding points on his upper body and his feet with pink chalk. And people enquired about prevention and cure of certain health problems they had encountered. Moreover, some issues such as contraception and sterilisation were hotly debated and I was at times astonished at the tone of these discussions, considering we were in church (once for instance, the pros and cons of coitus interruptus were discussed, the pastor having written the term on the blackboard).

### Conclusion

One of the most recurrent features in definitions of 'religious fundamentalism' is the acceptance of the inerrancy of a particular sacred text, such as the Bible or the Qur'an<sup>20</sup>. Thus one could argue that intense Bible study is to be *expected* of groups such as the Seventh-day Adventists who clearly do consider the Bible to be God's word. However, what the ethnography presented shows is not only that church members in my fieldsites engage in intense Bible study, but that Seventh-day Adventist practice in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka is of a distinctly *Socratic* nature. This stands in stark contrast to the image of 'fundamentalists' evoked in the literature as "rigid interpreters of a closed canon" (Harding 1992: 54<sup>21</sup>), as people who approach sacred writings more or less unthinkingly in their search for clear structures of authority and fixed truth.

In both my host families, and in all other contexts I was able to observe, daily Bible study as I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, was of a dialogical, discursive and participatory nature, and involved much intellectual engagement and critical thinking on the part of those engaged in it. And indeed, it seems to be the very *activity* of studying and learning which fascinates and interests church members, and which gives them pleasure, perhaps even more so than the answers they find by studying. Whenever I asked any of them what they liked about the Adventist church, their answers abounded with the word 'to study' (*mianatra*). And it was the prospect of new *study*

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<sup>19</sup> Church members in Maroantsetra often give each other foot massage, but I have never seen this happening in Sahameloka.

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. Marty 1992: 20, Coleman, J. 1992: 75, Masquelier 1999: 222, Bruce 2000: 94.

<sup>21</sup> Harding is *critical* of such a view (see below).

*material* which made people's eyes shine when they received a new edition of their Bible Study Guide.

With regard to the Sabbath, it has always been my impression in the course of my fieldwork that the main purpose was not to *worship* God – although of course that was also important – but to *study* and *understand* His word. I remember one Sabbath, for example, during which there were but two songs sung and two prayers spoken in the course of an entire day. The rest of it (i.e. six to seven hours) was spent studying and learning.

Adventist practice in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka provides an interesting contrast to the study of Holy Scriptures in Islamic contexts as discussed by Eickelman (1978) and others (Gilsenan 1987, Lambek 1993: 21-22 and Part 2). While Islamic practitioners – ‘fundamentalist’ or otherwise very devoted – aim at *memorising* the Qur'an, the Seventh-day Adventists I know employ a completely different “intellectual technology” (Eickelman 1978: 512). As I emphasised throughout this chapter, the focus of Sabbath School, like during other times of Bible study, always lies on comprehension and discussion of particular texts rather than on memorisation or reproduction<sup>22</sup>. Even when people recite verses by heart, the point is not pure memorisation, but comprehension of these Bible passages as part of the lessons studied throughout the week.

It is significant in this context, that the Adventists never repeat the same lesson, but are confronted with a new one every single day. And it is also significant that they do not study the Bible by starting with Genesis 1 and finishing with the Revelation. Rather, in the course of just one day's study, they zigzag right across the Old and the New Testament combining passages from, say, Exodus, the Epistles to the Hebrews, Daniel and St. Mark's Gospel, thereby continually creating novel text. This is, of course, particularly true for those church members who actually write sermons and other speeches. However, everyone who studies in such a way is involved in what Harding succinctly describes as “endlessly generating a third Testament” (1992: 54).

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<sup>22</sup> *Mianatra* also means to imitate or copy (“apprendre, étudier, imiter, contrefaire”, Abinal & Malzac 1993: 37). When Beby, for example, copies Biblical verses in her notebook decorating the page with flowers, she might *mianatra* in the sense of copying. However, in the great majority of situations it is the aspect of study in the sense of intellectual engagement which is being emphasised.

Indeed, the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka use the Bible very much like a school book, writing references and notes in it, circling or otherwise marking specific passages. On one occasion, Papan' i Beby glued into his Bible a newspaper clip I had brought him from Europe which concerned the creation versus evolution debate in America. In contrast to the Qur'an, the book itself is not treated particularly 'respectfully'. Bibles in my host families were lying on the floor, kept in a corner or in a cupboard muddled up with all sorts of other things and occasionally even used as a pad. This absence of fetishisation of the book itself does not imply, however, that people do not have an intimate and emotional relationship with their Bibles.

Seventh-day Adventist practice, as I observed it, is aimed at *understanding* Biblical truth rather than the consumption of ready-made doctrine or memorisation. Recall once again Papan' i Fredel's statement referring to Satan masquerading as one's ancestors, which he ends by saying: "That is *how I see it*. And when I started to study the Holy Scripture, *I had to say* that this is true". Note how his words evoke *him* discovering the truth.

This emphasis on *comprehension* is linked to what I discussed in the previous two chapters. As we saw, Satan not only promotes wickedness on this earth, but he deceives people into cooperating with him and in particular, as I discussed in chapter 8, into doing *fomban-drazana* (in particular exhumation and cattle sacrifice). The basis of Satan's success is people's lack of *knowledge* of the truth. This is why Bible study, and Bible study of a Socratic nature, is so important. Because it is only by *studying* and understanding God's word that one can discover the truth. I remember more than one occasion on which one of my Adventist friends criticised the Catholics and the Protestants for 'just believing' (*mino fô zare*) in Jesus, but failing to study the Bible and thereby to come to know what the Bible tells us about Him. As Papan' i Beby once said to me, following God is only valuable if it happens out of informed choice, in other words, if it happens on the basis of comprehension rather than blind faith.

Many observers of Seventh-day Adventism and other Christian 'fundamentalist' movements have noted the tremendous significance of Bible study as part of religious practice (e.g. Levine 1995: 162, Miyazaki 2000: 34-35, Walsh forthcoming). And some of these authors describe Bible study scenes which are very reminiscent of what I have

observed among Seventh-day Adventists in Madagascar. Listen to Ault for example describing Baptist practice in the USA:

“Both adult Sunday school and Wednesday night service are given over largely to instruction in Bible reading. The pastor leads the congregation in the study of an assigned passage. The result is much like a college seminar, provoking spirited responses and concentrated effort by any academic standard” (Ault 1987: 15-16).

Walsh observes that church services held by Jesus Saves converts in northern Madagascar

“can seem more like lectures than ceremonies. Standing on altars in little-adorned halls, pastors read biblical passages and discuss their relevance to the lives of congregation members who, for their part, listen intently, pens and notebooks in hand, taking note of readings that they might continue to study at home. (...) Home-study of the Bible is encouraged, and is in fact *the directive of the movement that is most attractive to some converts*” (Walsh forthcoming, emphasis added).

Similarly, Kessler observes “many opportunities for controversy” (1967: 226) during Sabbath School among South American Seventh-day Adventists in the 1960s, while Vance notes with regard to Adventist practice in the US in the 1990s that

“most [Sabbath School meetings] provide a format for discussion (...) allowing and even encouraging questioning of doctrine and examination of the parameters of Adventist teachings ...” (Vance 1999: 61).

Although all of these observations are made in passing, and their significance is not further elaborated, they encourage me to think that what I am discussing in this thesis may be relevant not just with regard to Seventh-day Adventism in my fieldsites, but also elsewhere and indeed concerning similar movements in different parts of the world.

Lehmann even suggests that the “close inspection” of inerrant texts is in fact typical of ‘fundamentalist’ practice generally (1998: 617-621). However, I am wary of such a generalisation. In the Pentecostal tradition for instance, authoritative speech is thought to derive from inspiration by the Holy Spirit (speaking in tongues) rather than from intellectual analysis as in the case I discuss in this thesis<sup>23</sup>. This seems to me to be a highly significant difference. However, this uneasy comparison also raises the question whether it is at all meaningful to think of such phenomena as Seventh-day Adventism and Pentecostalism as instances of religious ‘fundamentalism’, as is the case in contemporary writings about such movements, even if the term ‘fundamentalism’ is understood to refer to “family resemblances” (Caplan 1987a: 4) rather than a neatly bounded category.

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<sup>23</sup> For an interesting analysis of the significance of silence among early Quakers as a means of avoiding meaningless talk and of facilitating the experience of hearing “the speaking of God within” (p. 30), see Bauman 1983.

## Chapter 10

### Knowing and seeing clearly

#### “Adventists are people who know the Bible”

In the last chapter, I illustrated the eagerness with which the members of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka engage in daily Bible study, both in church and at home, and I have drawn attention to the Socratic nature of their engagement. I concluded that Bible study is important for church members in my fieldsites because it is seen as the road towards *understanding* God’s truth as well as Satan’s many ways of deception, the epitome of which is the practice of *fomban-drazana* in the sense of ‘pagan religion’.

The Adventists are not only very committed to Bible study; they also define what it means to be a Seventh-day Adventist as intimately linked to *knowledge* of the Bible. “Adventists are people who know the Bible” (*ôlo mahay Baiboly ny Advantista / mahay Baiboly ny Advantista*), they often said to each other, and to me. “Why do we conduct Bible quizzes?”, Papan’ i Silivie once rhetorically asked the congregation during a service in Sahameloka. He immediately provided the answer: “Because the Adventists are people who have knowledge of the Bible” (*manana fahalalàna mikaska Baiboly ny Advantista*). Hence they promote the acquisition of Biblical knowledge by various kinds of methods such as quizzes.

Whenever members of the church proselytised in the countryside, they did so *not* by giving speeches, say, about the glory of God, but by visiting people in their homes and engaging them in Bible study. Since such proselytising efforts were always undertaken on a Sabbath, those villagers who, probably out of sheer curiosity, visited the Adventists’ Sabbath service as they were invited to<sup>1</sup>, would see that Adventist practice was focused on Bible study. And by pointing to Exodus 20: 8-11 where one reads, “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy”, those proselytising promised to those listening that, if they joined the Adventist church, they would discover how they had

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<sup>1</sup> People, such as myself, who attend Adventist services without being members of the church are called ‘guests’ (*vahiny*). Every Sabbath, the number of guests present is recorded.

been mislead into accepting many wrongs. The message thus sent out was clearly that ‘if you become a Seventh-day Adventist, you are going to study the Bible and acquire knowledge of what is written in it, and Bible study will tell you how you have been deceived up to now’.

Church members not only define themselves positively as ‘people who study, and therefore know, the Bible’, but also negatively, as different from people involved in other forms of Christianity. As I mentioned in chapter 3, the majority of the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka were previously members of either the Catholic or the Protestant church. These former members of one of the mainstream churches emphasise that what distinguishes them, as Adventists, from Catholics and Protestants, in their view and personal experience, is precisely their knowledge and understanding of the Bible. In Adventist talk, the Catholic and the Protestant denominations are mostly lumped together, though people often claim that the former are even worse than the latter. ‘The Catholics and the Protestants carry the Bible to church and back, without ever opening or reading it’, I was often told in the same breath as people explained to me that Adventists were people who knew the Bible. Or: “The Catholics don’t ask any questions” (*tsy manontany zare*), “the Protestants don’t explain things clearly (*tsy mazava tsara be*)”. Reconsider the following statements which I cited in chapter 3:

“With the Catholics, the way they teach you, it is just like an empty belief (*finoanoam-pôna*, from *finoana*). One simply learns things by heart as one recites at school.” (Maman’ i Hery, Maroantsetra)

“I used to be a Protestant. But there I didn’t really learn anything much about what the Bible says. And I realized that the Adventists really explain things concerning God. That is what made me join them. With the Adventists, there is really sufficient Bible study! When I joined them, I was studying, I really began to study a lot! There is really a lot of study going on there! Because the point of going to church is to learn about God and His words.” (Papan’ i Filiette, Sahameloka)

Very similar accounts, identifying Adventism with Bible study and *knowledge* of God's word, were offered by numerous other church members both in town and in the village. Papan' i Filiette's account, above, is in fact part of a lengthy conversion narrative. And not only he, but several other church members too, linked their conversion experience to Bible study and their discovery that Catholic or Protestant practice, concerning Sunday worship in particular, was entirely unbiblical. Listen to Maman' and Papan' i Fredel answering my question as to why they had decided to join the Adventist church.

“We used to be Catholics. But with the Catholics, one doesn't study [examine] the Bible very enthusiastically. They simply say ‘The Catholic religion is true’. But when we read the Bible, we saw that the Sabbath is the true day of prayer, that is what the Bible says. And so we saw that the Bible is right and joined the Adventist church.”<sup>2</sup>

Several of my informants made anti-traditionalist statements, such as the following by Theodore, a teenager from Sahameloka: ‘As a Protestant, I used to go to church *without knowing why*’. Or people would say that others simply went to church because it was tradition (*fomba*) in their families. Such statements were not only intended as a criticism of Catholic or Protestant practice as my informants had experienced it, but they were also meant to highlight *informed choice* as the basis of commitment to the Adventist church, in contrast.

One might object that statements such as those cited above are retrospective constructions, and also that what the Adventists say of the Catholics and the Protestants, is not necessarily correct. This may be true. However, the question of authenticity is irrelevant here, because irrespective of their truthfulness, these narratives convey church members' subjective understanding of the nature of Seventh-day Adventism and why it is attractive, and they reflect how they now, as Seventh-day Adventists, understand their subjective experience of Catholicism and Protestantism. For them, the definition of

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<sup>2</sup> *Izahay voalohany zeny, Katolika. Kanefa, amin' ny Katolika akao, tsy fatra-pandinika Baibloy loatra, milaza fô 'Marina ny fivavahana Katolika'. Kanefa raha nandinika ny Baiboly, hita fô, Sabata zeny ny andro fivavahana, raha zahana amin'ny Baiboly akao. Marina ny lazain' ny Baiboly, hoy izahay, dia niditra nivavaka.*



being an Adventist is based on intellectual conviction and informed choice. And typically, they also express a strong dislike, and sometimes contempt, for ecstatic practices which converts to churches in the Pentecostal tradition are thought to engage in, precisely because there is too much ‘noise’ (*mitabataba loatra zare*).

That Adventist self-identification is very much based on *knowledge* is also revealed in church members’ view of what it means to come to accept Adventism as true, to become convinced of it. Here we encounter the concept of clarity again which I introduced in chapter 7.

I often perplexed my Adventist friends. From the beginning to the end of my fieldwork, i.e. over the course of nineteen months, I lived with members of the Seventh-day Adventist church and took part in all their church-related activities. Moreover, I wandered around Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, visiting various church members and asking them all sorts of questions related to their church membership. Everyone was always more than happy to talk to me about what they thought, felt and knew about their religion. I was thus exposed to an intensive introduction to Adventism and everyone was clearly aware of this<sup>3</sup>. With time, therefore, I became quite knowledgeable about the basic facts of Adventist doctrine, and familiar with Adventist practice. And the people who taught me noticed this with delight. I knew about the importance of keeping the Sabbath and could easily find the relevant Bible passage; I was aware of all the Adventist consumption taboos, and kept them; I had learnt much about the Bible and could now quickly open it at Matthew or Isaiah. In short: I knew enough. In fact some people observed that I knew much more about Adventist doctrine than many members of the church. However, I did not get baptised, and this became quite a puzzle for many members of the church in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka. Some of them sometimes took me aside after a church service, or invited me to their house, in order to give me further instruction and to clarify possible uncertainties on my part concerning the Adventist doctrine which might stop me from deciding to get baptised. They would enquire: “Is there anything which is not clear to you yet?” (*misy mbôla tsy mazava aminao?*). Observing that I failed to get baptised (*tsy mety vita batisa ianao*) despite the fact that I had obviously acquired sufficient *knowledge* of the Bible, the only solution they could think of was that something must not be *clear* to me yet. Nobody ever asked me whether

I perhaps did not *believe* (accept) what I had learnt. Thus, the local Seventh-day Adventists perceive of the process of coming to accept Adventism first and foremost as a matter of acquiring *knowledge*.

Although baptism, involving the acceptance of the creed, is a public statement of belief/acceptance/trust (*finoana*<sup>4</sup>), from the perspective of local Adventists, the basis of *finoana* is knowledge, and *finoana* has to be nourished by knowledge and understanding, rather than the other way round. As Papan' i Silivie once explained in church: 'Where does *finoana* come from? It comes from the sermon (*toriteny*). Where does the sermon come from? It comes from the word of Christ (*tenin' i Kristy*)'. Hence *finoana* – belief/trust, as I discussed in chapter 8 – is closely linked to the intellectual engagement with, and understanding of, the word of God from which it results. Papan' i Beby once told me that the basis of his *finoana* was the fact that history had proven all Biblical prophecies to be true. Hence the foundation of his religious commitment is the fact that he feels he *knows* that the Bible is true.

Moreover, what distinguishes Seventh-day Adventists from other Christians, in the view of the Adventists, is not that they accept (*mino*) the Bible as literally true, which they might have done already *before* they became Adventists and which, indeed, many non-Adventist Malagasy in the area of Maroantsetra I spoke to do. Rather, what they consider distinguishes them from other Christians is that they *study*, and hence know and understand, the Bible, as the quotes above make clear. Indeed, if church members did not already accept the authority of the Bible *prior* to their conversion, the Fourth Commandment ("Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy") would not have such rhetorical power for them. This observation is not only significant with regard to the topic of the present chapter, but it also raises interesting questions concerning religious 'fundamentalism'. As I stated in the conclusions to the previous chapter, the acceptance of (belief in) the inerrancy of a sacred text is generally thought to be central to 'fundamentalist' practitioners. However, in the case I study, conversion to Adventism does not necessarily, or clearly, mark the *beginning* of accepting the Bible as literally

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<sup>3</sup> The Adventist congregation in Sahameloka were well aware of my existence, and of the fact that I lived with Adventists in Maroantsetra, before I ever set foot in the village.

<sup>4</sup> In the Malagasy translation of the international Seventh-day Adventist creed which comprises thirteen points, *mino* is used to translate 'believe'. However, it is interesting that both in the English and the Malagasy version of the creed, the baptismal candidates are more often asked to

true, and there is no clear demarcation between the Seventh-day Adventists and others in this respect. Rather, what distinguishes them from other Christians, in their own view, is their emphasis on the practice of Bible study.

## **Incorporating and doing science**

In the previous section, I argued that the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka define themselves as people who have knowledge of the Bible. And in chapter 9, I described in detail how they go about acquiring such knowledge. From the point of view of church members, however, the Bible is not disconnected from other sources of knowledge, on the contrary. What I wish to discuss in this section is how church members in my fieldsites integrate what they learn from studying the Bible with other sources of knowledge, and how they look for proof of Biblical truth outside the Bible itself, namely in science.

There is one particular scientific theory which Seventh-day Adventists and other ‘fundamentalists’ emphatically oppose, namely the theory of evolution. It is obvious why this should be so from the perspective of people who accept the Bible as literally true: the theory of evolution contradicts, and belittles, God’s creation as told in the Book of Genesis. Indeed, the term ‘fundamentalist’ grew out of the evolution/creation debate in the 1920s in the USA, as I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis. In Maroantsetra, and more rarely in Sahameloka, the theory of evolution – although not always called by that name – is often discussed in church. Thus many, and perhaps even most, church members are aware that there are people who claim that humankind developed out of other species rather than having been created by God. This idea they strongly oppose, and evolutionism is often cited as one of Satan’s particularly nasty/clever tricks, pushing people to ungodliness. What might be misleading, however, is the fact that church members sometimes use the French expression *science* (or Malagasy-French combinations such as *ny mpanao science* [those who do *science*]) as a synonym for evolutionism. This is misleading if one assumes that what they refer to, when using the term *science*, corresponds to ‘science’ in the folk English (or the French) usage, which,

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*accept* (“Do you accept...?”/ “Moa ve ekenao ...?”) certain points of doctrine, than to *believe* in

however, is clearly not the case. In fact, they are very keen on scientific knowledge, in the English sense of the term, as proof (*porofo*) of Biblical truth. In what follows I will use the term 'science' in that sense, unless otherwise specified. The Bible and science are not *equal* as sources of knowledge, however. Science (geology and astronomy for example), from an Adventist point of view, is but a modest attempt on the part of human beings to comprehend the truth revealed in the Bible, but infinitely inferior to it.

The old question of the relationship between religion and science has figured prominently in the literature on religious 'fundamentalism'. From early on, it was recognised that 'fundamentalists' are not opposed to science, but rather attempt to validate religious truth on scientific grounds<sup>5</sup>. The Seventh-day Adventists are no exception<sup>6</sup>.

However, existing research on how 'fundamentalists' integrate scientific knowledge into their doctrine and practice (use of high tech media for instance) has focused entirely on the level of leadership and public rhetoric. What I wish to do in this section, in contrast, is to move the discussion to the grassroots level and to demonstrate how ordinary members of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka make use of scientific knowledge they encounter.

Once I asked Papan' i Beby *why, according to the Bible*, the animals tabooed in Leviticus 11 were dirty. His answer was revealing.

'Except with regard to the Holy Sabbath, the Bible does not explain *why* certain things are right and others wrong. This however, does not mean that we must not ask questions. God wants us to think, but sometimes the answers to our questions are to be found elsewhere, for example in *science* [here he used *science* to mean science as in the English folk understanding, not evolutionism]. Concerning Biblical food taboos', he concluded, 'every

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them.

<sup>5</sup> See Caplan 1987a: 11-12, Marty and Appleby 1992: 31-33, Mendelsohn 1993, Moore 1993, Tibi 1993. But see Deiros (1991: 179) for a different claim with regard to Pentecostalism in Latin America.

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent account of Creation Science, see Numbers 1992. Numbers himself is a scientist of Seventh-day Adventist background and upbringing, who later denounced Adventism. He is nevertheless wary of the science/religion dichotomy and continues to take the creationist side seriously.

single one had been scientifically proven to be unsuitable for human consumption’.

### **Incorporating science**

As I said earlier, evolutionism was often discussed in church. Once the pastor of Maroantsetra provided the following explanation during a Sabbath morning sermon. ‘There are two books of God, he began, the Bible and *la nature*<sup>7</sup>. *La nature* always proves the Bible to be right’. He then went on to illustrate the point with the following example.

‘Two fossils’ he explained, using the blackboard to graphically illustrate what he said, ‘were once found in two different layers of the same rock. The fossil in the *lower* layer represented a human skull identical to those of homo sapiens [although I do not remember him using this term that morning, it would not have been unusual for him to do so]. The fossil in the *upper* layer, in contrast, had been formed by a skull which was similar to that of homo sapiens, but which also bore certain animal features. Thus’, the pastor concluded, ‘the theory of evolution was clearly wrong, since according to it, the animal-like skull should have been found in the *older* rather than the newer layer of the rock.’

I later confronted him with my observation that according to Biblical creation, the animal-like skull should not have been there at all, neither in the upper nor the lower layer. To this the pastor replied that the ‘ugly’ (*ratsy*) face could have been an exception, possibly the result of some hereditary disease.

Church members found further scientific proof of the Bible in the field of astronomy. Once the pastor attended a training course in the Adventist centre in the capital; it lasted three weeks, and he brought back a notebook full of the latest astronomical findings. With shining eyes he explained to me the following. Scientists

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<sup>7</sup> In the course of his explanation, he also used the term *ny zava-boary* as a translation of *la Nature*. However, one must not assume that what he means by either *nature*, or *zava-boary*, corresponds to the French/English concept of nature. In fact, the notion of *nature*, and ideas about ‘natural healing’, among the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, are very interesting, and I hope to discuss these elsewhere.

(who had nothing to do with Adventism) had discovered that the sun developed into what it is today from a fuzzy, nebulous mass. Moreover, the sun would continue to grow to one hundred times its present size, and finally, it would become so hot that life on earth would become impossible. This theory of solar development, according to which the sun presently stands at three quarters of its journey, and which is supported by *anti-creationist* scientists *nota bene*, not only confirmed, the pastor concluded, the development of light out of darkness as explained in the first few verses of the Bible, but also the Biblical prophecy of the destruction of this earth by a “lake of fire” (Book of Revelation 20: 9-15). Astronomical information the pastor had obtained in the training course also proved helpful when Hery asked his question concerning the creation of Darkness I mentioned in chapter 9, to which the pastor responded with a lengthy explanation including the number of galaxies and the nature of light years. On another occasion, while travelling to Toamasina in a *taxi-brousse*, Jimmy, a young Adventist from Maroantsetra, informed me that astronomers had discovered a black hole in the constellation of Orion, and that it will be through this hole that Christ will descend when He comes back to earth in the not too distant future.

Even though science often ridiculed the Bible, scientists always had to admit to Biblical truth in the end. Such was the case, Papan’ i Beby related, with the story of the walls of Jericho told in Joshua 6. Scientists had long ridiculed the Biblical claim that the walls of Jericho had collapsed under the sound of ordinary trumpets. However, when they later examined the particular structure of these walls, they had to admit that what the Bible says was perfectly possible. Similarly, we read in Isaiah 40: 22 of “the circle of the earth”<sup>8</sup>. Hence the Bible had told us all along what scientists later believed to have discovered for the first time, namely, that the earth is round.

### **Transmission of information**

It would be misleading to imagine that most, or even many, ordinary church members in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka have direct access to detailed scientific data such as the number of galaxies in the universe. The pastor has privileged access to such data because of his contact with Adventist centres in Madagascar which pool this sort of information. And Papan’ i Beby’s level of knowledge about the world beyond Maroantsetra is very

exceptional. However, highly specific information about such things as fossil finds travels a long way through Adventist communication channels. As I mentioned above, the pastor included the information concerning the fossils, as well as the fact that this was proof against evolutionism, in one of his sermons in church thus passing it on to all those present. And one has to remember that listening to a sermon is considered by many as study time, and that people take notes of what they hear and learn<sup>9</sup>. District meetings are a particularly good opportunity to spread information to lots of people at once. Moreover, almost every Sabbath at least a couple of lay church leaders or other members from remote villages are present in the church in Maroantsetra. Those present that morning when the pastor told us about the fossils are likely to have taken this information with them to the countryside. Indeed, the fossil finds discussed above were mentioned during more than one church service in Sahameloka while I lived there, although not discussed in detail. Church members in Sahameloka were not familiar with the term evolutionism, but they knew that there was a theory which challenged God's creation, and that certain fossil finds proved it to be wrong.

In fact, what they were referring to is what is known among creation scientists as flood (or deluge) geology, a theory which uses geological data, particularly fossil finds, to prove the Biblical story of the Flood (see Numbers 1992). This theory goes back to a voluminous book called *The New Geology* by the Seventh-day Adventist, Price, published in 1923 in the US (Moore 1993: 46-47)<sup>10</sup>; flood geology had travelled from America to the remote village of Sahameloka. Or take the example of Papan' i Fredel explaining that Sunday was introduced as the day of worship by "some *Monseigneur* [Catholic priest] (...) in the year 321", as I discussed in chapter 4. According to one student of Seventh-day Adventism, the idea that it had been "the Papacy which had changed the Sabbath from the seventh day to the first" (Hoekema 1963: 96), was put forward by a man called Bates in 1847, a leading member of the Millerite movement, out of which Seventh-day Adventism grew. In the 1990s, this view arrived in Sahameloka.

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<sup>8</sup> In the Malagasy translation, the word *habakabaka*, which means firmament, is used. However, Papan' i Beby explained that this meant the same as *cercle* (circle).

<sup>9</sup> Literacy is, in this case, very significant for the transmission of knowledge.

<sup>10</sup> Price was the chief creationist authority in the Scopes Trial (Spuhler 1985: 108).

### Doing science

As the above evidence makes clear, for Seventh-day Adventists in general, and also for church members in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, scientific knowledge does not pose a threat to Biblical truth, but in fact supports it. In the case of evolutionism, the theory is simply wrong, as flood geology has proven. Seventh-day Adventists are thus involved, from their point of view, in debating one scientific theory against another, rather than debating religion against science. It is this involvement in a scientific debate which I believe is one of the key attractions of Adventism for someone like Papan' i Beby who is so hungry for intellectual activity, but has been denied higher education in his life. Seventh-day Adventism is his way of doing science; it is a possibility open to him of being an intellectual without a university degree. His thirst for knowledge is not limited to information directly relevant to the Adventist world view; he is like a dry sponge eagerly absorbing any information which comes his way. Hence he cares to memorise information he reads in his encyclopedia such as that it was the Roman emperor Vespasian who first introduced public toilets, or what a mausoleum is. There is no doubt that Papan' i Beby's level of self-taught education is highly exceptional. However, it is interesting that Adventist practice should attract and satisfy a person with such an extraordinary thirst for knowledge. It is also important to note, however, that church members in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka neither perceive of Adventist practice as a door to education in an *instrumental* sense, nor has it improved their chances in life, at least not so far (but see Lewellen 1978, 1979).

It is not only Papan' i Beby who is interested in sophisticated discussions concerning Adventist theory. One evening in Maroantsetra, Papan' i Miri (number 2 in the Sabbath School discussion reproduced in chapter 9) came by our house. He did not seem to have come for any particular reason other than a social chat. However, after a little while, I overheard him, Maman' i Beby and Papan' i Beby agitatedly discussing Adventist theory in the light of "the problem of the Malagasy" (*ny probleman' ny Malagasy*) of accepting the powerlessness of the dead. The situation struck me as being similar to a couple of anthropologists who meet socially, but end up discussing anthropological theory. Indeed a similar image forced itself on my mind on other occasions as well when I was observing church members in my fieldsites as they discussed Adventist theory; or, for example, as I listened to elaborations on why Jehovah's Witnesses (of whom there are a small number in Maroantsetra town) were



completely and utterly wrong. While, from an outsider's point of view, the differences between Adventist doctrine and that adhered to by Jehovah's Witnesses are relatively minor compared to the similarities (Jehovah's Witnesses in Maroantsetra also abstain from ancestral ritual for exactly the same reasons as Seventh-day Adventists), such theological differences were not at all minor to the people concerned who knew about the other group's doctrine. Was Paradise going to be in Heaven (Jehovah's Witnesses), or on earth (Adventists)? Had Jesus been crucified on a cross (Adventists), or on a stake (Jehovah's Witnesses)? Such were the theological differences which made Papan' i Beby's blood boil, and not only his, but also that of the leader of the small congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses with whom I had some contact, and who tried to convince me that the Adventists were wrong. As an outsider to both religions, these debates struck me as the technical discussions of two experts, rather like two academics from the same discipline who squabble over intradisciplinary differences any outsider would regard as negligible compared to their shared basics.

The Seventh-day Adventists in my fieldsites are not only keen to absorb scientific information they are confronted with as a result of their involvement in the church, and to be involved in a debate over such issues as the origin of humankind, but they also constantly look for *proof* of Biblical truth, matching evidence with theory in a way strikingly reminiscent of scientific *method*<sup>11</sup>. "True things have proof" (*misy porofo ny zavatra marina*) was a phrase I heard more than once among them, both in town and in the village. And everyone *was* indeed continually on the lookout for *new* proof of Biblical truth outside the Bible itself. Such proof people found in their own personal and daily experiences – as the Sabbath School discussion in chapter 9 shows – as well as in scientific findings of the kind discussed above. One day, Papan' i Beby asked me about the Greek Orthodox religion, because he knew that I had lived in Cyprus for some time. I told him about the importance of the Virgin Mary for Orthodox Christians and mentioned that she was referred to in Greek by the name *Panayia* which means 'The All Holy'. From Papan' i Beby's perspective, such an idea is blasphemy, because Mary, so he explained to me, was neither divine nor did she remain a virgin all of her life. This was clearly further proof of Satan's lies! Thus he quickly noted the expression *Panayia* on a piece of paper and asked me to write it down in Greek as well, rather like a scientist

who has stumbled over new evidence for his theory. Though I have not heard him use this particular information publicly in church thereafter, it is perfectly conceivable that he would do so, in which case one could equally imagine encountering the *Panayia* in Sahameloka and other villages in the Malagasy rainforest. Proof of Adventist doctrine does not only come from such unusual sources; members of the church in town and in the village discover it all around them in their daily lives. Deteriorating kin relations, for example, and unsatisfactory relations among *mpiara-mivavaka* (members of the Adventist church), were likewise interpreted as signs of Christ's imminent return, as was the cyclone which devastated parts of the district.

The Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka struck me as scientifically minded for the reasons I have discussed: in their daily approach to Bible study, the emphasis lies on scrutiny and comprehension; their definition of what it means to be a Seventh-day Adventist stresses investigation and knowledge of the Bible; and they consider it imperative to search for proof of Biblical truth.

However, there is clearly a limit to what sincere Seventh-day Adventists can possibly accept as true. For example, they cannot accept evolution – whatever proof may come their way – because to do so would be to challenge one of the fundamentals of their religion. So, are they really scientifically minded?

Thomas Kuhn's theory of what he calls normal science (1996 [1962]) has provided me with a useful framework for thinking about the scientific quality of what the Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka engage in. Kuhn's principal claim is that normal scientists – that is most scientists at most times – are not involved in open discovery, indiscriminately accepting any evidence available to them and ready to change their theory accordingly, although they claim they are. Instead they work and think within an accepted paradigm which determines and restricts their vision, rather like a pair of green glasses which makes the whole world seem green. Thus normal scientific activity is not based on scepticism as generally assumed, but simply confirms what one already knows. Starting from his observations on normal science, Kuhn develops a theory of "the structure of scientific revolutions" which he claims are caused by "paradigm shifts" and which, unlike normal science, do lead to scientific progress.

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<sup>11</sup> It is interesting that Percy, a concerned believer, criticises 'fundamentalists' for always

However, here I am mainly concerned with his analysis of normal science. Let us look at Kuhn's provocative argument in more detail. He defines a paradigm thus:

"[Paradigms are] universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners" (1996: x).

Normal science Kuhn characterises as

"... research firmly based upon ... achievements that some particular scientific community acknowledges for a time as supplying the foundation for its further practice". (...) "No part of the aim of normal science is to call forth new sorts of phenomena; indeed those that will not fit the box are often not seen at all. Nor do scientists normally aim to invent new theories, and they are often intolerant of those invented by others. Instead, normal-scientific research is directed to the articulation of those phenomena and theories that the paradigm already supplies" (1996: 10, 24).

In other words: normal science is "paradigm-based research" (1996: 25) and a paradigm is a framework of thought uncritically accepted by a community of practitioners. "Novelty ... is not a desideratum" (p. 169). In the course of his engaged, and engaging discussion, Kuhn likens the activities of normal scientists to the activity of solving a puzzle, either a jigsaw or a crossword puzzle (p. 35-42). I particularly like the image of the jigsaw. Kuhn makes two main points. First, the purpose and the thrill of doing a jigsaw is not to produce a novel outcome, but the discovery of *how to get* to the predetermined solution. Second, there are certain rules of the game. For example, one cannot put the jigsaw pieces upside down. If one breaks such rules, one will never get to the solution.

I have come to think of the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka as people who are involved in something rather similar to Kuhn's normal scientists. Their search for knowledge is clearly restricted by the fact that they think, and

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wanting *proof* of God's love (see Percy 1996).

interpret, evidence within their paradigm, which is literal Biblical truth. And what does not fit the box, is not seen. Thus when explaining the Adventist fossil theory to me, the pastor did not see that his suggestion that the ‘ugly’ face could have been an outcome of some hereditary disease dismantled his entire argument.

At the same time, though, a paradigm in Kuhn’s sense is “sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems for the ... group of practitioners to resolve” (p. 10). The Adventists’ Socratic-style engagement with the Bible is precisely due to the fact that what they get out of the Bible is food for thought. A paradigm does not “explain all the facts with which it can be confronted” (p. 18), just as the Bible does not *explain* why certain food is taboo. But paradigms provide scientists “with a map” (p. 109), a metaphor which interestingly is also used by Nancy Ammerman in her description of Christian ‘fundamentalists’ as people with “a sense of having the right road map” (Ammerman 1994b: 149).

According to Kuhn, normal science is concerned with three activities: “determination of significant fact, matching of facts with theory, and articulation of theory” (1996: 34). When the cyclone hit Sahameloka, Maman’ i Claude determined that this was a significant fact; by interpreting the cyclone as a sign of the last days of the world approaching, she matched fact with theory; and her interpretation was at the same time an articulation of her theory.

Like Kuhn’s normal scientists, the Adventists I know can be compared to people doing a jigsaw, in that they are first and foremost interested in the *process* of making the jigsaw grow. Church members are motivated by a desire to understand the *details* of Biblical truth, rather like someone who makes an X-ray of a body in order to see what is inside and understand how it all works and how every organ relates to the body as a whole. At the same time as being involved in this fascinating inquiry though, they must follow certain rules in terms of content and methodology: the Bible must always be consulted (all jigsaw pieces have to be face up) and non-Biblical evidence is only allowed if it does not contradict the Bible (respecting elders is fine, but exhuming the dead is not).

The analogy I propose here has limits, though. Normal science has an in-built mechanism which eventually causes an existing paradigm to be abandoned and a new one adopted, a mechanism which, in short, leads, from time to time, to scientific revolutions. If we think of Biblical truth as the Adventists’ paradigm, then no such

revolution is conceivable. However, recall how Maman' i Claude responded to the Biblical requirement to hate one's father and mother if one wants to follow Jesus:

'The Bible is like a forest: there are all kinds of trees and plants in a forest. There are many, many good trees in a forest, but there are also many which are not all that good. And so it is with the Bible. Most of what is written in the Bible is good and true, but there are some verses which are not all that good. It is just like with a forest. One has to choose the good ones'.

If Maman' i Claude was a normal scientist, she would perhaps be among those who induce a scientific revolution, for according to Kuhn (p. 144-159), scientific revolutions are triggered by a few exceptional individuals who realize that certain evidence does not match the theory. It is also very interesting in this context that such critical opinion came from Maman' i Claude who has much less Adventist training than Papan' i Beby for example. For according to Kuhn, training "is not well designed to produce a man who will easily discover a fresh approach" (1996: 166).

I wish to emphasise that I am not attempting to make a *general* point about the nature of science or the relationship between science and religion; I am in no position to do either. I simply want to propose an analogy between the activities of Kuhnian normal scientists on the one hand, and religious practice among the Seventh-day Adventists in my fieldsites on the other<sup>12</sup>.

The members of the church are people with a complex biography. They are not just Seventh-day Adventists. They come from somewhere, they are presently involved in Adventism, and it is possible that they will follow yet another direction in the future. Thus when one looks at their lives as a whole, they have gone through at least one major paradigm shift, namely conversion to Seventh-day Adventism. And in accepting the paradigm of Biblical truth, they are confronted with certain novelties, for example the evolution/creation debate. What is most astonishing concerning this debate is how much

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<sup>12</sup> One could perhaps argue that while one of two essential characteristics of Kuhn's paradigm is that it *ends* interdisciplinary *competition* (1996: 10), the Adventists are *defensive* vis-à-vis those who in their view do not accept the Bible. However, when we look at the Adventist congregation as a scientific community within which a particular paradigm is universally accepted, rather than one of many competing groups within the wider society, this difficulty disappears.

the Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka have *made it their own*, although as far as I understand, it does not resonate with anything that they were previously concerned with. I do not know why they are so interested in this particular debate; perhaps this is an example of pure intellectual speculation in a Lévi-Straussian sense.

### **Looking through Adventist-tinted spectacles ... but not always**

Often, the members of the church do not only think within a given paradigm while they are involved in Bible study; they look through Adventist-tinted spectacles at many more things than are directly related to the religion they have embraced. However, it is also important to remember, as I discussed in chapter 5, that much of what they do day in, day out – farming land, working in an office, bringing up children – is not affected by their membership of the church. At the same time though, news is almost always read through their Adventist spectacles, as the example relating to the cyclone suggests. This is largely because for the Adventists (as for other ‘fundamentalists’, see Marty and Appleby 1991a: 1, 1995: 5-6, Bruce 2000: 16), there is hardly a distinction between what outsiders might call religious and secular news<sup>13</sup>. Rather, almost everything can be interpreted as a manifestation of Adventist prophecy. The pastor interpreted news of the increasing unification of European countries as a sign of the world’s powers uniting in preparation for ‘the difficult times’ (Sunday law)<sup>14</sup>. At the risk that Papan’ i Beby is excessively present in this section, I will conclude with a couple more illustrations of his way of thinking.

Papan’ i Beby had heard, I do not know where from, that the multinational company Virgin was being fined by the French government for opening their stores on Sunday which apparently the French law forbids. Despite increasing fines French Virgin stores remained open on Sundays. Papan’ i Beby concluded that this was yet another powerful sign announcing the introduction of the Sunday law which Virgin was resisting. Whether it was an act of conscious resistance against the Sunday law or not, Virgin was a hero in Papan’ i Beby’s eyes.

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<sup>13</sup> At the same time though, Adventists such as the pastor and Papan’ i Beby who had an explicit opinion on such things, were very outspoken *against* the merging of state and religion, because this would lead to dictatorship.

<sup>14</sup> Nyaundi, a Seventh-day Adventist believer writing about the development of the church in Gusii (Kenya) since 1906, makes exactly the same point. And like the pastor and Papan’ i Beby in Maroantsetra, he emphasises the necessity of keeping state and religion separate (1997: 224).

However, even someone like Papan' i Beby who can explain almost anything he encounters with reference to Adventist doctrine, sometimes takes his Adventist-tinted spectacles off, although this may not happen consciously. I caught him twice.

To my delight, Papan' i Beby saw himself very much as my teacher in various kinds of subjects. Thus one day, he informed me about a sunken continent called Atlantis which used to lie between Europe and America, but which had disappeared a long, long time ago. He did not mention *when*, exactly, Atlantis had disappeared, but it was clear from the way he was talking that he thought of this sunken continent as having existed in the dim and distant past. Yet according to the Adventist doctrine, which Papan' i Beby knows in his sleep, God created the earth only 6000 years ago and history since creation is well documented in the Bible. There is no unknown 'dim and distant past'. I quietly took notes ... On another occasion, however, I challenged him.

We were talking about the unhealthy lifestyle of modern Westerners<sup>15</sup>. At one stage, Papan' i Beby exclaimed in perfect French: "*Dès que l'homme s'assoit, il a perdu sa queue*", which one might translate as 'When man sat down, he lost his tail'. He did not mean this metaphorically, since we were discussing how unhealthy it was to sit as much as people in the West did. Papan' i Beby had implicitly acknowledged human evolution from a being with a tail to one without. I challenged him: 'If that is so, did Adam have a tail?' To my surprise, he said 'yes'. I am quite sure he does not actually think that, but he realized that he had gotten himself into a logical dilemma. Feeling very bold just then, I continued to ask whether God, too, had a tail, because the Bible said that God made Adam in his image. 'No!', Papan' i Beby replied quite shocked at this blasphemy of mine. And he continued to correct his previous answer concerning Adam, now insisting that only Eve had had a tail. That is clearly *not* Adventist doctrine; Papan' i Beby simply tried to sort out the mess he found himself in. I had caught him at a weak moment, so to speak. Any other day, he would have found a convincing way out of the dilemma he had maneuvered himself into by his rash citing of the proverb. However, the anecdote illustrates that although committed church members may, at most times, look at the world through Adventist-tinted spectacles, they are caught up in many more

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<sup>15</sup> My host family in Maroantsetra was always very keen on information about just how far decay had gone in the West, because it was all 'a sign'. This had the disturbing effect that terrible news such as concerning gang rape or weapons of mass destruction were received by them almost with joy. Bad news was good news, because it announced Christ's return.

complexities and ambiguities than might at first appear, and they might change register, as it were, from one moment to the next.

## **Bible expertise and school knowledge**

During fieldwork in the area of Maroantsetra, as well as when travelling in Madagascar, I have always found the Malagasy people to be very interested in information about the world *andafy*, literally: ‘beyond the sea’ (Abinal & Malzac 1993: 37). *Andafy* is used to refer to any place outside Madagascar, whether Mauritius, Africa or Europe<sup>16</sup>. The people who live *andafy* are generically called *vazaha*, although, usually, this term is used for White people and especially the French<sup>17</sup>. In Maroantsetra, Sahameloka and elsewhere in Madagascar, I often found myself bombarded with questions concerning what people *andafy* ate, how long it would take and how much it would cost to go there by airplane, what people wore, and whether it was true that there were places entirely populated by *vazaha*.

Whilst being interested to find out more about *andafy*, many Malagasy I have met, in particular rural people, have but the haziest of ideas of the world beyond Madagascar. Many for example believe that the world consists entirely of islands. And I have often been asked whether there were mountains, trees and rivers *andafy*, just like in Madagascar, or whether thunder and lightning also existed where I came from, and whether the moon would also shine at night. And many people were utterly surprised when I told them that indeed that was so. When people heard that the *vazaha* do not necessarily eat rice every day and that bananas, breadfruit, pineapples and coconuts do not grow everywhere, they sometimes expressed pity for the *vazaha*, for they seemed to have practically nothing to eat.

In the district of Maroantsetra, no newspapers are available, not even in town. Many people have a radio, also in the countryside, but they mostly listen (when they have batteries) to the local radio station which plays hardly anything but popular songs.

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<sup>16</sup> When people in Maroantsetra spoke to me about the world beyond the sea, they would often use the expression *aminandre*, which means ‘the place where you (foreigners) live’.



Thus one of the few potential sources of information about the world beyond Madagascar are schools.

Compared to many other countries in the Third World, Madagascar has a very high level of elementary schooling<sup>18</sup>. However, as I discussed in the introduction, there are, largely due to the history of Christianisation, vast differences between the level of scholarisation in different parts of Madagascar. According to oral history, access to schooling in the area of Maroantsetra, and the quality of what is actually taught has, if anything, deteriorated in the course of the past decades. And indeed, older people were often more literate than the young.

Be that as it may, at the time of my fieldwork, many pupils seemed to learn astonishingly little at school. Mezaquei for example, the nine-year old boy of my host family in Sahameloka, was not able to read a single word, or to even write his own name, after having repeated the first class of the village primary school five times already. Beby, the fifteen-year old girl of my host family in Maroantsetra was, after several years of tuition in the English language, unable to hold even the simplest conversation. The only thing she could actually say was that her name was Beby, and that she was fine. At the same time though, her notebook was full of complicated English grammar which she had copied from the blackboard during tuition and which she was struggling to learn by heart for the exams. Tuition seemed to a large extent to consist of copying information from the blackboard without comprehending what it meant<sup>19</sup>.

Florentin, a middle-aged member of the Adventist church in Maroantsetra, had been trained as a teacher. When I knew him, he worked as a civil servant at the *Perception Principale* (which belongs to the Ministry of Finance). Yet he was unable to work out how many years he had been with the church, despite knowing that he had been

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<sup>17</sup> In certain very isolated areas, one might hear people refer to other Malagasy, in particular the Merina, as *vazaha* (Maurice Bloch, personal communication). In the area of Maroantsetra though, this is not the case.

<sup>18</sup> According to UNICEF statistics available on line, about 50% of men and 44% of women are literate in Madagascar. 16% of either sex attend secondary education.

<sup>19</sup> As I mentioned in footnote 22 of chapter 9, *mianatra* means both to study and to copy. Also see Bloch (1993b: 91-94) on a description of a day at school with Zafimaniry children.

baptised in 1987 and that it was now 1999. Similarly, Papan' i Silivie in Sahameloka knew that he was born in 1964, but he was at a loss to calculate his age<sup>20</sup>.

The members of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka are no exception in terms of their general understanding of what the world *andafy* is like. Listen to the conversation I had with Papan' i Fredel, and Papan' i Tahina shortly after my arrival in Sahameloka. Papan' i Fredel attended local primary school for a few years, and was in his late forties when I met him. Papan' i Tahina was in his early twenties. He is of Betsileo origin on the side of his father and so, he was sent to the Malagasy highlands (Ambositra) for a couple of years of secondary school. However, this seemed to have been a failure and he was embarrassed to talk about it. Papan' i Tahina was one of two local Adventists who had attended more than, at the most, five years of primary school in Sahameloka, or another nearby village. Our conversation went something like this:

Papan' i Fredel: 'Where exactly are you from?'

Me: 'I am from Switzerland.'

Papan' i Fredel: 'Right, but from which country?'

Me: 'Switzerland is a country, it lies next to France [if people know anything about 'abroad', it is normally related to France].'

Papan' i Tahina: 'Does Switzerland also belong to France like Madagascar?'

Papan' i Fredel: 'We don't belong to France any longer, don't you know that!'

Papan' i Tahina: 'Oh really [slightly embarrassed], I didn't know that, I thought we still belonged to France [Madagascar became independent in 1960, but Papan' i Tahina was born in the early seventies].'

Papan' i Fredel: 'Which direction does one have to go to reach *andafy* [cardinal points are very significant all over Madagascar]?'

Me: 'Well, that depends, there are many different places *andafy*. If you want to go to France or Switzerland for example, you have to go north.'

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<sup>20</sup> But compare Lave 1988 (also Bloch 1993b) for a discussion of how poor school knowledge exists side by side with elaborate knowledge in things such as mathematical calculation outside the context of the school .

Papan' i Fredel: 'Really! I thought *andafy* was to the south of Madagascar [Maroantsetra lies in the north of Madagascar and so local people often think that almost everything else lies further south].'

Papan' i Tahina: 'Where is Africa?'

Me: 'That's to the west of Madagascar.'

Papan' i Tahina: 'Do the Karany [Malagasy-Indians] also live with you in the north?'

Me: 'No, the place where the Karany and the Chinese live lies to the east of Madagascar.'

Papan' i Tahina: 'Where is Asia?'

Me: 'That's precisely where the Karany and the Chinese live.'

At this point, I got up and drew a rough map of the world into the sand which probably did not make much sense to either of the two men I was talking to. I pointed out the different continents, including America.

Papan' i Tahina: 'This is where America is? But in which *kontinanta* [continent] is it?'

Me: 'America is a continent. A big mass of land like that, comprising many countries, is called a continent.'

Papan' i Fredel: 'Egypt [of which he read in the Bible] is an island, isn't it?'

Me: 'No, Egypt belongs to the African continent, it is a country in the north of Africa, but it borders several other countries.'

Papan' i Fredel: 'Isn't there a president called Bill Clinton somewhere?'

Me: 'Yes, that's right, he is the president of America.'

Papan' i Fredel: 'Is Mauritius as far away from Madagascar as where you come from?'

Me: 'No, Mauritius is very close to the east of Madagascar, it only takes something like an hour to get there by airplane.'

The conversation continued for about half an hour in the same style.

Besides being the only member of the Adventist church in Sahameloka who had ever lived outside the district, Papan' i Tahina was also one of the elected lay church leaders at the time I lived there. And in that capacity, he had no problem whatsoever to give a sermon in church, written by himself, which combined numerous Biblical references from right across the entire Bible, requiring a high degree of Bible expertise.

He can sketch the history, from creation to the Flood to Jesus to today, with ease. Similarly, Papan' i Fredel, who does not know in which direction Africa lies, or that Egypt is not an island, knows that the Pope is presently preparing the implementation of the Sunday law, and that Sunday as the day of worship was ratified by some "Monseigneur in the year 321". In short, although there are, of course, exceptions, such as Papan' i Beby, I was often struck by the immense gap between church members' expertise in Biblical and Adventist matters, on the one hand, and their lack of the kind of knowledge one learns at school, on the other.

Thus, do church members perhaps perceive of Adventist practice as an alternative route to the kind of education that schools fail to provide? Such an argument would seem particularly apposite with regard to Sahameloka where the quality of schools is extremely poor, and the number of Adventists is disproportionately high.

While the quality of schools in Maroantsetra town leaves a great deal to be desired (such as the availability of teachers for all exam subjects), in the countryside it is much worse. In Sahameloka, as in most other villages of that size, there is a primary school where the children theoretically receive five years of education. In reality, however, tuition is very often cancelled because of the teacher having gone to town, or because of the rice harvest or something else. I was told that a couple of years ago, Sahameloka's school teacher failed to come to work for a period of several months, due to the fact that he was staying in another village with relatives. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> April, the cyclone completely destroyed Sahameloka's school building. By the time I left the field in mid May, nobody had lifted a finger yet to rebuild it. Given the poor quality of teaching in rural areas, it is extremely rare for someone from the countryside to proceed to secondary education in town.

Much of the literature on Seventh-day Adventism proposes an instrumental link between conversion and access to education provided by the church<sup>21</sup>. In places where the Adventist church actually provides schooling for people who otherwise have none, access to education may well be a strong incentive for people to join the church. However, this is not the case in the district of Maroantsetra. And indeed, I think that the

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<sup>21</sup> Poewe 1978: 309, 316, Pfeiffer 1985, Chowning 1990: 35-36, Martin 1990: 75-76, 87, 207, Nyaundi 1997: 78-84, 248, Westermarck 1998: 60 and footnote 17. In Lewellen's analysis of Adventism in the Lake Titicaca region, access to education also plays a pivotal role (1978, 1979). But in contrast to the rest of the literature, he does not suggest that people value education primarily for instrumental reasons (see introduction: 44).

hypothesis that for members of the Adventist church in my fieldsites, especially in Sahameloka, Bible study is a substitute for the poor quality of their school training does not hold for the following reasons.

It is very surprising that the members of the Adventist church in Sahameloka, and to a lesser extent in Maroantsetra, know so little about the world beyond Madagascar. After all, everything related in the Bible, which the Adventists spend hours studying, happened *andafy* (not in Madagascar). And in the Bible, there is plenty of talk about Jesus walking through cornfields, Moses being abandoned by a river, or the Sermon on the Mount<sup>22</sup>. Thus why should church members have been surprised, as they were, when I told them that *andafy* as well, there were people farming land and that indeed there were mountains and rivers<sup>23</sup>? The fact that church members do not infer this kind of information about the outside world from the Bible suggests that what they seek in it is knowledge of a different nature than that learnt at school.

The disconnection between Bible study and schooling is also illustrated by the fact that church membership does not seem to change people's view of the value of schools. As many other people in Sahameloka, adult members of the Adventist church are often very lax about whether or not their children attend school. Mezaquei from my host family hardly ever went (which is probably why he had not learnt anything in five years), but continually found, or invented, some excuse or other for not attending (he was already late, he couldn't find his tiny, worn-out blackboard and the like). Sometimes, he set off for school, only to be discovered later on in the morning sneaking up behind us as we went into the forest. Perhaps this is not surprising behaviour on the part of a nine-year old. What was, however, surprising to me was that his parents hardly ever scolded him for not attending school. Sometimes they did a bit, but his non-attendance did not have any consequences. Several others among the teenage Adventists in the village had quit school after just two or three years. Nobody made a fuss about it, nor did anybody seem to think that these children were missing much<sup>24</sup>. The attitude of

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<sup>22</sup> The Protestant Malagasy version translates 'mount' with the standard Malagasy expression for mountain: *tendrombohitra*.

<sup>23</sup> I have no data which would suggest that the Adventists thought of Biblical narratives as simply not relating to *present* times.

<sup>24</sup> Again, my host family in Maroantsetra town was an exception in that the education of their children has always been, and still is, their primary concern and they are prepared to make substantial financial sacrifices in order to send both their son and their daughter to good schools elsewhere than Maroantsetra.

the Adventists towards their children's school attendance reflected the mood in the village as a whole. Of course, *if* the Adventists perceived of Bible study as an alternative to schooling, then they would not insist on their kids going to school. However, like everyone else in the village, they theoretically always claimed that schooling was terribly important. And they did not stop sending their children to school altogether. Their involvement in the Adventist church simply did not affect the way they related to schools.

It is true that the reading skills of many Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka have improved considerably as a result of regular Bible study. The most striking example is Emanuel, a man in his late fifties when I met him. Emanuel never went to school, and he was completely illiterate when he joined the Adventist church as a young man in 1972. However, with the help of other members of the church, he began to learn to read and write and kept practising over the years. When I met him twenty-six years after his initial conversion, he was an elected leader of the church in Maroantsetra. He read absolutely fluently and in general made the impression of a very sophisticated man, dressed in a stiffly ironed white shirt and a suit on the Sabbath, giving lengthy sermons while putting his glasses on, and taking them off in a scholarly manner as he spoke to the audience. His case was sometimes referred to, with pride, as an example of the potential achievement of Bible study by others. Although Emanuel was clearly an exception, several other church members told me that before joining the church, they never had anything to do with paper/reading and writing (*taratasy*), but that their reading abilities had much improved since. However, for many their literacy remains too limited to have any practical impact on their lives. After nine years of involvement in the Adventist church, Papan' i Claude, for example, still needed the support of his son when he had to deal with a contract (to do with selling land for example). As I mentioned earlier, he struggled to sign his name.

Moreover, in none of the conversion stories I collected was there a link made between the attraction of the Seventh-day Adventist church and schooling, in particular literacy. Only Maman' i Hery once suggested, in an *indirect* way, that Bible study made up for what both the Catholic church and schools failed to provide. I have cited this statement of hers twice already. Here it is again:

“With the Catholics, the way they teach you, it is just like an empty belief. One simply learns things by heart as one recites at school.”

However, what her statement, as I understand it, mainly conveys is not a dissatisfaction with not having enough school knowledge, but a desire for a *different style of learning* than is practised at local schools, namely active participation.

By way of conclusion, I want to suggest that for church members in my fieldsites, there is a marked disconnection between Adventist practice and the kind of knowledge acquired at school, hence the former is not perceived as replacing the latter. It may seem to an outside observer that the kind of scientific knowledge I discussed in the previous section of this chapter – knowledge of particular fossil finds, astronomical data – is typical school knowledge. However, to the people concerned, knowledge of fossil finds is of an entirely different nature to school knowledge, because it is thought of as proof within a process of critical investigation.

This conclusion has potentially far-reaching consequences which, however, I can only hint at here. If I am right in proposing that what the members of the Adventist church wish to learn through Bible study is not that which schools have failed to teach them, but that instead they want to acquire knowledge of an entirely different nature, and that they want to learn through a process of a different nature than practised at local schools, then this would suggest that education based on critical investigation as promoted in modern Western contexts is not just an ethnocentric preoccupation, but does indeed strike a chord with many people outside those contexts.

In the final section of this chapter, I want to address yet another hypothesis which one could propose concerning the attraction of the Adventist church for people in places such as Maroantsetra and Sahameloka.

## The question of emotional commitment

It has often been argued that salvationist or millenarian movements are attractive, particularly to poor people in the Third World, because they promise a better life elsewhere and elsewhere, because they carry a message of hope for those who have little to expect from their real future lives and make it possible for the powerless to at least imagine themselves in a different situation than they actually are. Corten, for example, speaks of the “utopia” beyond the miserable circumstances of this world which makes Pentecostalism attractive to the poor in Latin America (1999: 154-156). And it is precisely “*salvation* of the individual through a personal relationship with Christ” which has been described as the core of different forms of Evangelicalism (Caplan 1987a: 20, emphasis added). Hefner even argues that the genius of world religions in general “lies in their curious ability to renounce this world and announce another, more compelling and true” (Hefner 1993a: 34).

The Seventh-day Adventist movement can be classified both as salvationist and millenarian. The essential characteristic of millenarian movements is that they share a prophecy of a not too distant future characterised by supernatural bliss and plentitude and devoid of suffering and injustice (see e.g. Worsley 1970: 22, Whitehouse 1995: 2, Robbins & Palmer 1997: 9, Bozeman 1997: 140)<sup>25</sup>. Seventh-day Adventists share the expectation of salvation as well as that of a future of supernatural bliss thereafter with many historically related movements. However, Adventist doctrine, taken at face value, tells us little about people’s *commitment* to it. What I wish to do in this last section of the present chapter, therefore, is to examine what exactly *moves* the Seventh-day Adventists in my fieldsites with regard to Adventist prophecy, and to distill those aspects of doctrine they are *emotionally* committed to. I start my discussion with two features of Adventist prophecy. The first one concerns the millennium.

One of the central aspects of Seventh-day Adventist doctrine is the distinction between the first and second death, and the first and the second resurrection. All humans must die as a result of the original sin; this is the first death. All righteous dead, however, will be resurrected at Christ’s return *prior* to the millennium, and together with



the righteous living, will ascend to Heaven and never die again. All those who have failed to follow Christ will be resurrected *after* the millennium, but only to receive the Last Judgement and then be annihilated forever and cease to exist; this is the second resurrection and the second death which only the unrighteous have to suffer. However, not many members of the Adventist church in either Maroantsetra or Sahameloka would be able to give even an approximate account of these future events, although they have certainly all heard about the details of Adventist prophecy at some stage. Even Maman' i Beby kept getting mixed up about their exact sequence. However, what she and others like her were absolutely clear about was the purpose of the events *during* the millennium. She and her husband illustrated the millennial scenario to me by way of a thought experiment which went like this:

'Imagine Maman' i Beby arriving in Heaven. She tries to find Papan' i Beby since, on the basis of his pious life on earth, she is certain that he must be there as well. But she fails to find him, and nobody else who knew Papan' i Beby has seen him either. Doubts arise in her mind: might God have made a mistake in this particular case? How could He not have saved Papan' i Beby who dedicated his life to Him? The only way her doubts can be removed is for God to show her, to *prove* to her that His judgement is indeed just.'

Nobody really knows how exactly God will do this, Papan' and Maman' i Beby explained, but they imagine a kind of massive cinema screen on which – in the unlikely case that Papan' i Beby should indeed fail to be among the resurrected – God will show a kind of film demonstrating how Papan' i Beby secretly commits adultery or how behind his devout Christian appearance, he was, in reality, a witch. The purpose of the millennium, for Maman' and Papan' i Beby, is thus to make God's judgement absolutely *clear* to everyone and to remove any potential *doubt* in the minds of the resurrected as to

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<sup>25</sup> Millennialism, in contrast, refers to the biblical prophecy of the postapocalyptic thousand-year-reign (Robbins & Palmer 1997: 9). Seventh-day Adventist doctrine is both millenarian and millennial.

the justice of God's judgement<sup>26</sup>. It is almost as though God and Maman' i Beby were to have a Sabbath School discussion at the end of which God would ask Maman' i Beby whether it was now *mazava* (clear) to her why her husband was not in Heaven.

Although I do not think that many members of the church have such clear images of the events during the millennium as Maman' and Papan' i Beby, people are aware and emphasise that God, in some way or another, will *prove* his justice and that there will be no more *doubt* of whatever kind. "True things have proof" (*misy porofo ny zavatra marina*), as we heard earlier.

The second future 'moment in time' I want to consider is life in Paradise after the millennium and after the final annihilation of Evil and death. I imagine people's mental images of Paradise to be very splendid, but there is one aspect which is of particular importance for the present discussion. And that is the fact that God Himself will come out into the light for everyone to see. He will sit on his throne in Paradise and He will be of flesh and blood. People will be able to touch Him. The Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka often talked about this aspect of life in Paradise. And when they did, their eyes would shine with the anticipation of actually *seeing* God. In the Sabbath School discussion I cited in chapter 9, two features were particularly prominent. The first was the necessity to prepare oneself for Christ's return, the second was the anticipated joy of seeing clearly what is at present still clouded in mist. Reconsider the following extract from that morning's discussion in church in Maroantsetra.

"It is like with a competition. If one doesn't know what the first and second prizes are, people will hesitate to take part. But if they know what they will get, they will rush to take part as well. If they know that the first prize is a bicycle, then everyone will want to take part. You see, it is just like that with us knowing what is waiting for us in Paradise, for example that the blind will see, the deaf will hear and that we will see God sitting there. But it is not really that the blind will see and the weak will become strong which is so fantastic about this place there [Paradise], but that we will see God living together with us. [Someone else: Yes, that's exactly

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<sup>26</sup> This is exactly how the purpose of the millennium is described in Seventh-day Adventist documents (see for example *Ce que croient les adventistes. 27 vérités bibliques fondamentales*, 1990: 368-69, Dammarie les Lys: Editions Vie et Santé).

right!] What we have long been wondering about is: what is Jesus really like? What are his hands like, which had the nails in them? What is God's life like? And what is His name? (...) All of that we will see there!"

Once I asked Papan' i Emilie, Maman' i Claude's brother who was also an Adventist and who often visited us, what he liked about Paradise. He gave me the following answer in more or less these words:

'There will be no more *finoana* (trust/belief). One sees God with one's own eyes (*hita maso*)! That's what I like. One doesn't doubt any longer (*tsy misalasala intsony*). Here on earth human beings always doubt, they ask themselves 'what is true? what is not true?', but in Paradise there will be no more doubt.'

There was little of the Adventist doctrine that people had less doubt about and which they spoke of more enthusiastically than the prospect of the end of doubt. They seemed to be more doubtful, for example, concerning the *material* blessing of life in Paradise.

Shortly before I left Sahameloka, my host family and I were studying the daily lesson in the evening as usual. It concerned the absence of suffering and death in Paradise to which Papan' i Claude added that all streets and buildings will be made of diamonds and pure gold, as indeed the Adventist doctrine says. After a few moments' silence which seemed to me to be filled with doubt as to the truth of what Papan' i Claude had said, I ventured to express that I found that difficult to believe. Everyone present immediately picked up on my point, confirming that it *was* indeed difficult to believe that everything in Paradise would be made of diamonds and gold. But Maman' i Claude was quick to add that it *was* true because the Bible said so. Nevertheless, I strongly felt that I had voiced their own thoughts.

I am aware of the speculative nature of my argument. However, I ask the reader to give me the benefit of doubt, simply because it is due to the nature of the question that I address in this section, rather than insufficient ethnography, that I cannot offer more conclusive evidence.

Based on my observations throughout fieldwork which I summarised above, I conclude that what *moves* the Malagasy members of the Adventist church I know with regard to the prophecy of salvation, is not so much the promise of a blissful future – although the prospect of the end of illness and suffering more generally certainly also appeals to church members – as the anticipated joy of overcoming doubt and uncertainty, the promise of *knowledge* of the divine and of clarity of mind<sup>27</sup>.

In the course of my fieldwork, I came across an oddity concerning the Adventists' emotional commitment to various parts of the doctrine they adhere to. As I mentioned earlier, and as is obvious in the Sabbath School discussion I cited in chapter 9, the Sunday law (the prohibition on worshipping God on any day other than Sunday) is one feature of Adventist doctrine which almost all church members, even in remote villages such as Sahameloka, have heard of. And they endlessly talk about it as a reference point when interpreting events such as the cyclone, and emphasise that it will come into force 'before too long' (*efa tsy ela*), almost certainly within their lifetime, and possibly within the next few years<sup>28</sup>. With the Sunday law – which is thought of as the unmistakable sign that the sequence of events which will eventually lead to eternal life in Paradise has begun to unfold – comes the persecution of all those who continue to worship God on the Sabbath. And church members in my fieldsites indeed imagine their own persecution in concrete terms. I have heard people say how lucky they were – in contrast to other Adventists in other parts of Madagascar and elsewhere – to live near the forest, so that they could hide. I have heard people say that once they would be hiding in the forest, God would send them water and food. I have heard people speculating on whether or not their non-Adventist kin and neighbours would become their persecutors.

However, when church members talk about the Sunday law and their imminent persecution, they show no emotion, they show no fear<sup>29</sup>. They talk about it with a

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<sup>27</sup> In response to Rafael's influential study of the impact of early colonisation among the Tagalog which emphasises the attraction of the notion of paradise (1993: chapter 6), Cannell has discussed how among another Filipino Christianised people, notions to do with salvation and its opposite – heaven, hell, sin – remain surprisingly underdeveloped (Cannell 1999: chapter 7 and 196-197).

<sup>28</sup> Ever since the Great Disappointment of 1844, the Seventh-day Adventists globally have been careful not to give any *specific date* for Christ's return.

<sup>29</sup> In contrast to what I am describing here, Harding (1987) has discussed how among born-again Christians in the USA repeated exposure to rhetoric creates emotion.

lightness, even cheerfulness at times, which I found most astonishing given the fact that what they are envisaging is not someone else's destiny, but their own future suffering. In my host family in town, talk of persecution could acquire a rather theatrical and even comical quality.

One day, Kiki showed me what would happen under the Sunday law. He picked up our dog's rope and, putting the noose around his neck, started to imitate a person about to be hanged. Changing roles and imitating his murderer, he then said firmly: 'Do you still pray [on the Sabbath] or not?' 'I still do!' was the equally firm answer. And so the noose was pulled and he was hanged. On another occasion, the entire family exploded with laughter as Kiki (who often played the clown) mocked drunk non-Adventists staggering after Adventists in order to stab them with knives on New Year's Eve at the dawn of the year 2000. Although the point of Kiki's performance was to make fun of the stupidity of both many Adventists, and others, for assuming that the persecution would occur *in the year 2000*, and not to mock the persecution as such, I was amazed at the ease and jollity with which they were dealing with the topic. Kiki had said another time that he thought the persecution was no more than five years away.

Although I did not observe other members of the church dealing with the issue of persecution in such comical ways, I never felt that people were actually afraid or at least worried about the prospect of having to run away and hide in the forest. Despite their explicit talk about the persecution, they did not seem emotionally moved. Only once, during a neighbourhood meeting in Maroantsetra, did I have the impression that one of them, Maman' i Monde, was genuinely concerned.

These observations have forced me to consider whether, in contradiction to what I claimed in this and the previous chapter, church members in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka simply reproduce doctrine when they talk about the Sunday law, without what they reproduce actually being very meaningful to them. Taking once again the example of the Sabbath School discussion I quoted in chapter 9, it is striking that despite the fact that the participants talk repeatedly about 'the difficult times', meaning the persecution, nobody expressed any fear, and nobody looked afraid as they were talking. Thus how important is it really to the participants of the discussion to prepare themselves not only for life in Paradise, but also for the 'difficult times' as they stress it is, if the prospect of the Sunday law and of the persecution in fact remains remote to their immediate concerns? I do not know. It is important to keep in mind that emotions

such as fear are not necessarily expressed or visible. However, what is particularly interesting in my view with regard to the discussion that Sabbath morning, is the fact that although the *content* of the discussion failed to be charged with emotion, the discussion itself was very lively and engaged, and in this sense moved the participants. Thus what I want to suggest is that even at times when particular features of Adventist doctrine may be simply reproduced, the members of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka nevertheless take pleasure in *developing their argument* and in participating and contributing to a discussion in which they enthusiastically engage. This observation leads me once again to the conclusion that at the heart of the attraction of Adventist practice for church members in my fieldsites lies the *study process itself*, and that it is in the first place the *process of intellectual engagement* which moves them. Recall Papan' i Lorica staying up till after midnight studying by himself; recall Maman' i Luc and Hery stepping forward in church in order to ask questions which had come to their minds while studying at home; recall Papan' i Claude's attempts at Bible study; recall Kiki lying on the veranda reading the Bible.

Perhaps the discussion that Sabbath morning was a truly *academic* discussion, rather like we imagine what might have taken place at Plato's academy; a discussion, in other words, not for the purpose of coming to particular conclusions, but for the purpose of a participatory search for knowledge.

## Chapter 11

### Literacy, books and potency

In my discussion up to now, I have emphasised the innovative quality of Seventh-day Adventist practice in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, and I do think that it is essential to recognise the specificity of what church members engage in. However, it is also important to take into account the continuities between Adventist thought and practice, on the one hand, and locally meaningful concepts, on the other. Earlier on, I pointed to the significance of the notion of taboo (*fady*) both locally and for members of the Adventist church. In this chapter, I want to discuss continuities between local and Adventist notions with regard to literacy, books and potency.

#### The significance of writing in Madagascar

Written text and literacy have enjoyed a long history of prestige in Madagascar. The oldest written documents we know of are the so-called *sorabe*, or Great Writings<sup>1</sup>. These are a series of books in Malagasy language, but written in Arabic script which are in possession of the Antaimoro of southeast Madagascar, a people with historical connections to the Arab world. Some *sorabe* contain information on the mythical origins of the Antaimoro<sup>2</sup>, some are works of medicine, geomancy, divination and astrology. Before the arrival of the first Christian missionaries in 1820 and subsequent scholarisation, Malagasy society was basically non-literate and the Antaimoro were unique in their scribal tradition. It was not only the esoteric knowledge contained in the *Sorabe*, but also the Antaimoro's writing ability which gave them influence and power in pre-Christian times before literacy became widespread. Antaimoro scribes, diviners and medicine men were employed by many other peoples all around the island (Deschamps 1959: 27, Dez 1983: 111). But their writing skills became particularly important when the Merina kingdom began to expand in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and increasingly became an elaborate, centralised state and administrative organisation. Merina kings sent for

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<sup>1</sup> For details see Bloch 1968 (reprinted in Bloch 1998: 131-151), Munthe 1982, Dez 1983, Rajaonarison 1994.

<sup>2</sup> The Antambahaoka who live in the area of Mananjary to the north of the Antaimoro also claim historical connection to the Arab world and they also have knowledge of the Arabic script (Bloch 1968). However, the literature mostly mentions the Antaimoro as the owners of the *sorabe*.

Antaimoro scribes to settle at their court in order to receive their advice on auspicious times for military action and on medical matters based on the information contained in the *Sorabe*. Antaimoro also acted as secretaries to the rapidly growing administration of the Merina kingdom (Bloch 1986: 14). Moreover, they taught the royals to read and write and even opened a school in Antananarivo (Bloch 1968: 287).

In the 1820s, when LMS missionaries made their first attempts to set foot in Madagascar and embark on their program of spreading the gospel, largely by way of teaching the Malagasy how to read the Bible, King Radama was very sceptical towards the *religious* program of the missionaries (Bloch 1986: 16, Raison-Jourde 1991: 287). He was, however, very keen on particular skills they would bring with them, in particular literacy (Ellis, W. 1838: chapter 10, Raison-Jourde 1974, Raison-Jourde 1991: 287). He was particularly interested in the Roman script because of his political alliance with the British at the time (Bloch 1986: 16-17), and because he considered “the idea of putting together and printing a dictionary, of fixing spelling” which would enable written “communication with foreign powers” far more promising for his kingdom than access to the Antaimoro’s *sorabe* (Raison-Jourde 1995: 292). Radama accepted the LMS missionaries into the country, but it is clear that he did so largely because of the perceived power of the written word. Literacy thus opened the doors to the Christianisation of Madagascar.

Subsequent rulers opted for different policies with regard to Christianity and literacy which became spread among a considerable part of the population (Bloch 1989b: 22, Raison-Jourde 1995: 292). In fact, the Bible, the first Roman-script book in Malagasy published in 1835, came to be seen as a major threat to royal authority under Radama’s successor, Queen Ranaivalona. Ranaivalona saw the Bible as the book of the royal ancestors of the foreigners, and Christianity as their cult; she expelled all missionaries (Bloch 1989b: 23-25, Raison-Jourde 1991: 287, 1995: 292). At the same time though, those Merina “who wanted to resist this spiritual colonisation wrote their own ‘Bibles’” (Bloch 1989b: 24), i.e. manuscripts which contained information on the history and ethnography of the Merina (Bloch 1989b: 22-24). This was part of the process of the creation of ‘Merina religion’ which I mentioned in chapter 8.

Later on, in 1869, the Merina royalty accepted Christianity as their state religion. However, as I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the gospel, and with it



literacy, were spread very unequally across the island. The district of Maroantsetra belongs to those coastal areas where both reached comparatively late.

In highland Madagascar, the written word has been highly prestigious, or at least considered powerful, ever since the time of the Antaimoro scribes at the court of the Merina monarchy around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, one must not *assume* that what literacy has come to mean in the highlands is necessarily also true for elsewhere in Madagascar. In fact, the main point of Bloch's discussion of literacy in Madagascar, from which I have cited above, is to show – in critical response to Goody's theory of the 'great divide' (Goody 1968) – that literacy *in itself* does not have any particular quality and does not carry any particular implications, but that what literacy and writing exactly mean in a given society always has to be looked at contextually (Bloch 1989b, 1993b).

Bloch describes how, among the Zafimaniry, almost all kinds of texts, including government communications and bra ads are “presumed to come from an immensely powerful beyond and because of this they are taken to be true without question, but also because of this, these messages are not, nor expected to be, informative in a practical way” (1993b: 103). Although I am not sure whether the same would apply, to the extent described by Bloch, among the people in the area of Maroantsetra, it is certainly true with regard to the Bible and, as I will discuss below, for *books* in general. As I mentioned earlier, in the area of Maroantsetra, the Adventists are not extraordinary in their belief in the literal truth of the Bible, but many Catholics and Protestants accept the Bible as literally true as well. And as I examined with regard to the relationship between Bible study and school knowledge, at least the members of the Adventist church do not look for information in the Bible such as what the world beyond Madagascar is like. Thus in both these respects, my ethnography overlaps with, though it does not entirely correspond to, Zafimaniry ethnography.

However, here I want to examine a slightly different aspect of how Seventh-day Adventist practice is continuous with local notions of literacy. I want to focus not so much on the power of written text, but on the local concept of education, of which literacy is perceived as the epitome.

### Studying and potency

Literacy is highly significant among the members of the Adventist church for obvious reasons: the better somebody can read, the easier it is for them to study the Bible. Furthermore, as I mentioned in various places of the present thesis, it is the most literate members of the church who are thought best equipped to be lay leaders as well as to take on other duties such as chairing Sabbath School discussions. But, as I emphasised in chapter 4, a good command of the written word is neither linked to a status of authority, nor to authoritative interpretation of the Bible. Giving the most literate members of the church certain roles and duties is simply a pragmatic decision. And their specific role as leaders is strictly limited to the context of Bible study.

However, literacy is not just seen in an instrumental light. And in this respect Seventh-day Adventists do not differ from other people in the area. In order to explain this, I need to say more about local people's view of *vazaha* (all foreigners, but particularly White people). Since I was such a *vazaha* who suddenly entered their lives, people were more or less forced to relate to me in some way or another. And the ways in which they did so were highly revealing. What follows does not specifically refer to members of the Adventist church, but to the local population more generally.

The people in the area of Maroantsetra are generally very impressed with what they refer to as the *fahaizana* of the *vazaha*. *Fahaizana*, and the related verb *mahay*, are quite difficult words to translate, because they have many shades of meaning<sup>3</sup>. However, at the core of *fahaizana/mahay* lies the notion of knowledge/capability<sup>4</sup>.

Whenever the Malagasy speak of the *vazaha* (White foreigners), the expression *mahay* is not far, and often there is a sense of awe, as well as of *vazaha* superiority and, accordingly, Malagasy inferiority. The *vahaza* are knowledgeable and capable ("*mahay ny vazaha e!*"); the Malagasy are not. Down to daily objects – such as the spoons with which the Malagasy eat – *vazaha* used as an adjective denotes superiority over *gasy* (short for Malagasy). Thus a spoon made of cheap, thin aluminium is called a 'Malagasy spoon' (*sotro gasy*), whereas a 'vazaha spoon' (*sotro vazaha*) is a much more solid,

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<sup>3</sup> Dictionary entries read: *mahay* = savoir, connaître; pouvoir, pouvoir faire, être capable, être compétent, fréquenter, savoir gouverner, savoir conduire (Abinal & Malzac 1993: 205). Or: *mahay* = savoir, connaître, compétent (Rajaonarimanana 1995: 132).

<sup>4</sup> See Freeman 2001 for a beautifully written discussion of the difference, yet also intimate interrelatedness, of *fahaizana* (outsiders' knowledge), on the one hand, and *fomba* (ancestral tradition), on the other, among the northern Betsileo.

shiny, and also more expensive object. These are among many similar expressions used in daily routine (also Bloch 1994a [1971]: 30-32, Cole 2001: 221-222, Freeman 2001: 211-215).

The *fahaizana* of the *vazaha*, as spoken of in the area of Maroantsetra, is basically of three kinds: technical, medical, educational. In Sahameloka especially, my Olympus 140-zoom camera would elicit statements of great admiration for the *fahaizana* of the *vazaha*, and even more so the fact that it could take pictures all by itself when manipulated accordingly. My tape recorder and especially my tiny, but powerful microphone which I used for recording conversations, produced similar reactions. After I had turned the tape recorder off, those who had talked always loved to listen to their own voices through my headphones. This was a big thrill for young and old alike and probably the most attractive aspect of the whole procedure. As soon as the 'listen through the headphones' part had begun, lots of children would normally gather and beg to be allowed to listen too through these funny little things one puts in one's ears. I do not think anybody in the village had ever listened to anything coming through headphones before, and so not surprisingly, people were enormously excited at this new display of the *fahaizana* of the *vazaha*. But even much simpler things were considered evidence of such knowledge/capability. Not too long after I had arrived in Sahameloka, I received a musical New Year's card from a friend in Europe. When one opened it, it produced a song! From the moment my 'singing letter' (*taratasy mihira*) had arrived in Sahameloka, to the moment I left the village several months later, it was shown to almost every visitor who came into our house. The popularity of my singing letter became such that I had to hide it and deny its existence in order not to have the whole village at my doorstep. Whoever had the privilege to be shown the miraculous thing though, first stared at it in disbelief and after the mystery of how it worked had been revealed, listened to the Christmas melody making repeated statements to the effect of how impressive the *fahaizana* of the *vazaha* was.

Medical knowledge is another manifestation of the *fahaizana* of the *vazaha*. While I lived in Sahameloka, I was often consulted as a 'doctor'. Once I was presented with an obviously very ill child who was completely covered in blisters. To my untrained eye, the child looked like it had a serious skin disease, but neither did I have any clue as to what exactly the baby could suffer from nor did I have any appropriate medicine with me. And so I apologised to the baby's father telling him that unfortunately I had no

medical training whatsoever and that I therefore was very sorry that I could not help his child. He did not seem to believe me. The baby's father was sceptical towards my apology, because by virtue of being a *vazaha*, I was expected to have at least some degree of medical expertise. *Vazaha* have *fahaizana*. Once someone in Sahameloka presented me with a broken camera and was visibly disappointed to be told that I did not have the faintest idea how to mend it.

People in Sahameloka as well as Maroantsetra are, however, not simply impressed with the know-how of the *vazaha*, but to them things such as my musical card are a *manifestation* of potency. One day, again in Sahameloka, I had joined a couple of people sitting on the veranda of the house of the village president. We were discussing the forthcoming solar eclipse in Madagascar. There was a lot of publicity about this event and people were warned not to look at the sun, unless they had a pair of special glasses provided for such purposes. As a result of this awareness raising campaign, people in Sahameloka were terrified that they would all go blind. At one stage of the conversation, the wife of the village president asked me: "Is this [the eclipse] something human beings [meaning *vazaha*] do? God does this sort of thing, doesn't He?"<sup>5</sup> She was not quite sure. I was asked similar questions after the cyclone.

However, although all *vazaha* are perceived to have *fahaizana* much superior to the average Malagasy, *vazaha* capability is not thought of in essentialist terms. *Vazaha* are not thought to be born with *fahaizana*. Thus how do they end up so knowledgeable and capable of constructing such miraculous things as a camera which can take pictures all by itself? The answer is simple: *vazaha* have studied and have gone through education.

When I arrived in the village of Sahameloka, I learnt to do different tasks. One of these was to plait women's hair. The first couple of times I did this, loads of people gathered around and watched me plaiting. When I managed to do it fairly well, if not perfectly, everyone immediately concluded that it was *because I was educated*, because I had gone to school and studied for years, that I was so quick at learning how to plait hair. Many of them had seen me writing with incredible speed and reading thick books. "People who have gone to school /people who have studied don't take long to learn new things" (*ôlo avy nianatra malaky mahay raha; ôlo mahay taratasy malaky mahay raha*)

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<sup>5</sup> *Tsaboin' ny olombelona? Tsaboin' i Zanahary, tsy zeny?*

was the conclusion of everyone who watched me learning a new task whether it was plaiting hair, planting rice or weaving a fish trap. Thus *fahaizana* not only implies know-how of various kinds, but also the capability of *learning* quickly.

Having gone through higher education and being good at reading and writing has, for us, nothing to do with the ability to learn how to plant rice. On the contrary, there is a stereotype in the west that penpushers are no good at manual work. Not so for people in the area of Maroantsetra. For them, the fact of having studied – of which literacy is the visible epitome – is the basis of *all* learning ability and of a capability, or potency, of a very general nature. Thus although it is obvious to people in Sahameloka, too, that writing and reading is not at all the same thing as planting rice and requires quite a different kind of expertise, it was my *education* which accounted for the fact that I was quick at learning how to plant rice. My ability to write quickly and to read thick books completely merged with my ability to learn to plait hair. It is this potency of a very unspecified nature which is what the *vazaha* have, and the Malagasy lack, in their view. It is this potency people evoke when they note that the *vazaha* truly *mahay*.

I have chosen to speak of potency, rather than power, because it is not an issue of political or economic power, although such power may well result from potency, as indeed people in Madagascar observe to be the case with regard to the *vazaha*. It is an issue, as I said, of unspecific capability. Of what exactly the *vazaha* are knowledgeable, or what exactly their *fahaizana* is, people in a place such as Sahameloka have a rather vague idea. The *vazaha* are assumed to know all the things which are out there to be known, whatever these things may be. Although their *fahaizana* becomes visible through such things as a singing letter or a camera, *fahaizana* is a general quality rather than any particular skills. Perhaps it was this perception that led to speculations as to whether or not the *vazaha* can bring about a solar eclipse. This was not the only instance when it was suggested that the *vazaha* have complete control over the environment. Many people suggested that the environment *andafy* (beyond the sea), where the *vazaha* live, must be completely *mazava* (clear), meaning clear of dark spaces such as forest, consisting entirely of concrete buildings and cars. It was this view of the world *andafy* which caused people in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka to be surprised when they were informed that *andafy* as well, there were people who farm land.

However, the most important point for the purpose of the present thesis is not the fact that the *vazaha* are thought to have *fahaizana*, but that their *fahaizana* is

conceptualised as intimately linked to *study* and *education* of which literacy is the most obvious manifestation. And this brings me back to the Seventh-day Adventists.

As the foregoing discussion makes clear, Adventist practice, with its emphasis on Bible study, resonates extremely well, on the one hand, with the high regard for the written word and literacy in Madagascar that one can trace back to at least the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and, on the other, with the view, which I have found among the population in Sahameloka and Maroantsetra, that those who have studied become generally capable. Moreover, *vazaha* potency is first and foremost linked to *the act of learning* which is precisely, as we saw, what lies at the heart of the attraction of Seventh-day Adventism for church members in my fieldsites. In short, there are significant continuities between local concepts related to literacy and learning and the Adventist emphasis on Bible study. And there is yet another continuity which, however, is rather surprising.

### **Selling books**

In Maroantsetra town, no written material is available other than what pupils receive at school and perhaps some pamphlets the Protestant and the Catholic churches may provide. There are no newspapers, no books other than the worn-out Bibles, missing half their pages, which many households are in possession of. However, this is not entirely correct, because there is in fact one source of books: the Seventh-day Adventist church.

A dozen members of the Adventist church in Maroantsetra town were, at the time of my fieldwork, employed by the church as professional<sup>6</sup> door-to-door book sellers<sup>7</sup>, among them Maman' i Omino whom I sometimes accompanied on her rounds<sup>8</sup>. As far as I am aware, none of these book sellers ever went to the countryside to sell books there; thus, what follows only concerns Maroantsetra town.

Dressed in her very best outfit, Maman' i Omino spent much time walking around town, knocking at the doors of affluent members of society (such as rich Chinese merchants or the director of the local electricity board) who could possibly afford to buy

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<sup>6</sup> Although a book seller employed by the Seventh-day Adventist church is not supposed to do any other work, this is clearly not the case and would probably be completely unpractical partly because twelve book sellers in a town of the size of Maroantsetra are far too many. When they run out of business in Maroantsetra, some of them sometimes travel to other nearby towns to try their luck there.

<sup>7</sup> Their wages consist of a certain percentage of the retail price of the books they actually sell.

<sup>8</sup> The fact that at the time of my fieldwork Papan' i Beby was in charge of managing the entire Adventist book business in Maroantsetra gave me some valuable insights into these activities.

one of the books she carried in her bag. For the books she had on offer were very expensive<sup>9</sup>, and their prices by far exceeded the financial means of Maman' i Omino herself, the other Adventist book sellers and the great majority of the members of the church. Moreover, practically all of them 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, or only a little<sup>10</sup>. Most of the books the Adventists in Maroantsetra sold were publications by a French publishing house<sup>11</sup> which although not explicitly declared to be Adventist, clearly has close affinities to the church<sup>12</sup>. Since these books are primarily produced for European readers, they are mainly about healthy nutrition, and include tables concerning the vitamin and protein content of different foods. But to people in Maroantsetra, neither would the recipes make much sense if they could read them, nor would they have the required ingredients – muesli, strawberries, fresh vegetables, soya milk<sup>13</sup> – were they to try out any of them. One of the most popular books Maman' i Omino sold was a publication which gave advice as to how to deal with daily stress symbolised by an overpowering clock on the cover. As with strawberries and muesli, having to rush from one place to another is not exactly among the daily problems of the local population. However, the trophy for both sellers and potential buyers was a massive French Catholic (!) Bible with golden page edges, rich in colourful illustrations of popes and churches. Surprisingly, this Bible was also supplied by the Adventist church. It cost the equivalent of a civil servant's monthly salary, and thus most people who decided to purchase one had to buy it by installments<sup>14</sup>. To possess such a Bible was, however, everyone's dream, even Papan' i Beby's, despite his contempt for the Catholic church in general and the Pope in particular.

The Seventh-day Adventist church is clearly seen, by its members and other inhabitants of Maroantsetra alike, as a place where books come from. And although, as I

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<sup>9</sup> Most of the books the Adventists sell cost around 100,000 – 180,000 Fmg (£10-18) at the time of my fieldwork. In comparison: a civil servant or a teacher had a monthly salary of about 400,000 Fmg.

<sup>10</sup> Adventist book sellers are sometimes called to Madagascar's capital for instructions regarding the content of the books they sell, so that they can extol them without actually having read them.

<sup>11</sup> Vie et Santé, in Dammarie-lès-Lys.

<sup>12</sup> Their annual calendar for example highlights Saturdays.

<sup>13</sup> The ideal Adventist diet is vegan in imitation of the original food in Paradise and anticipation of life in the Paradise to come.

<sup>14</sup> A book seller who sold such a Bible which cost 400,000 Fmg (roughly £40 in 1999) received 70,000 Fmg.

mentioned earlier, I am not sure whether Antimaroa people (people of Maroantsetra) would think of ads from a magazine as coming from an “immensely powerful beyond” (Bloch 1993b: 103), proper books do often have an almost mysterious aura about them for local people in accord with notions of written sources and literacy I noted at the beginning of this chapter. And it seems indeed, that it is this aura of authenticity that makes the books Maman’ i Omino and others sell around town desirable to its population, much more so than their content which many buyers are unable to read, and which, even if they could, would be unlikely to make much sense – except in the case of the Bible. The purpose of buying any of the books Maman’ i Omino and others sell, is possession and display. And in fact, people sometimes bought books which were still wrapped for protection solely on the basis of descriptions of what was to be found inside.

The business of members of the Adventist church selling books in town is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, these books are valued by their buyers for the quality of being written text. In contrast to what I discussed above, people do not associate any act of learning with them.

Secondly and more importantly, this also applies to the members of the Adventist church. Considering the emphasis on engaged study and *comprehension* as the core of Adventist religious practice, it is astonishing that the Adventists, like other people in town, aspire to have one of these books even though, as I said, few could actually read them. Maman’ i Omino, a very enthusiastic and involved member of the church, thought it a great shame that she could not afford to buy any of the books she sold, although she was perfectly aware that their content was well beyond her literacy, particularly her literacy in French which was limited to a few words. In short, the business of selling books, though these are books provided by the Adventist church, is curiously *disconnected* from Adventist religious practice. Ironically in fact, the Catholic Bible I mentioned above is treated by members of the Adventist church with considerably more awe, if they ever get close to it, than the Bibles they use for daily study.



## Conclusion

This chapter has examined continuities between Adventist practice and locally meaningful concepts related to literacy, books and potency. Three conclusions can be drawn from the foregoing discussion.

First: The Seventh-day Adventist practice of Bible study as I have described it in this thesis mirrors the prestigious quality which written text and literacy have been attributed for a long time in certain parts of Madagascar at least.

Second: Seventh-day Adventist practice is also continuous with the high regard for education, linked to potency, which I have found among the local population in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka.

Third: The way church members in Maroantsetra town view, and relate to, books *other* than the Bibles they use for study in daily religious practice (and Ellen White's books if they have them), does not differ from how other people in town relate to books including the Bible. This, however, implies a surprising and curious disconnection from the focus on *comprehension* and *study* so prominent within Adventist religious practice. Thus Maman' i Omino goes around selling books on muesli and stress not feeling sorry that she cannot *read* them, but regretting that she cannot afford to *buy* them. It is almost as though the Adventists in Maroantsetra excluded their Bibles from the category of books which they, as others, approach with awe, and which they, as others, do not attempt to study and comprehend.

For members of the Adventist church and other people alike, the Bible is the epitome of all books, because more so than any other, it is thought to come from "an immensely powerful beyond" (Bloch 1993b: 103). At the same time though, the members of the Adventist church relate to the Bibles they use for daily study in a completely different way than they relate to any other book including Bibles not used for study. Thus one might ask: Although the Bible is the book of all books for the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra, do they actually perceive of it as a *book*?

## Chapter 12

### Conclusions

In the introduction to this thesis, I outlined the question which stimulated my research on Seventh-day Adventism in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka. The question I was at first confronted with was the apparent discrepancy between what the Seventh-day Adventists seemed to lose and what they did not seem to gain as a consequence of joining the church. All that seemed to result from membership of the church was trouble with their non-Adventist kin due to the Adventists' non-participation in ancestral ritual practices, in particular exhumation and cattle sacrifice.

The purpose of this thesis has been to go beyond this observation. In order to understand the nature of the attraction of Seventh-day Adventism for the members of the church in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, I have in particular examined the nature of Adventist practice and of people's motivation and commitment to engage in it.

#### Conversion and commitment

A person's motivation to be involved in a particular religious movement is not a static feature in their lives, but inevitably must change over the course of time. For example, as I discussed in chapter 3, Maman' and Papan' i Claude in Sahameloka were very clear that they *originally* joined the church because Claude, their eldest son, recovered from severe illness immediately after they had attended a Seventh-day Adventist service, a desperate attempt on their part to save his life. However, when I lived with them, nine years had passed since then, and at that moment, it would have been extremely misleading to explain their involvement with Adventism by simply pointing to Claude's recovery, although they have not forgotten about it.

Maman' i Omino's conversion stories (in the plural), leading her in and out of several Christian denominations in succession, seemed largely guided by chance. Once she simply mistook one church for another, and that is how she came to spend three months with the *Ara-Pilazantsara* rather than the *Fiainana ao Kristy* where she had intended to go. Eventually, Maman' i Omino became a Seventh-day Adventist. She could not tell me what exactly made her, at first, remain in the Adventist church other

than that she liked to sing in the choir. But when I met her, fifteen years after her initial conversion, she was one of the most committed and active members of the church in Maroantsetra. She still liked to sing, but there was much more to be understood about her involvement.

Papan' i Fredel was an alcoholic before joining the Adventist church. He slowly but steadily drank his family into ruin and beat his wife when drunk. After conversion to Seventh-day Adventism, he mastered alcoholism. His was the only case in the district I know of, where many of his non-Adventist kin were actually glad about his conversion. But when I came to know Papan' i Fredel several years later, his problem with alcohol had become a remote concern, and what he had discovered in Seventh-day Adventism in the meantime was something quite different.

Moreover, we must not forget the development over two or more generations. Claude knew perfectly well that his parents had joined the church because of his recovery. However, he was only eleven years old at the time, and for him Adventism surely acquired many more shades of meaning as he grew up with it. But can we disentangle his conversion story and that of his parents?

The simple fact of the changing nature of people's commitment to a religious movement has been neglected and largely overlooked both in the literature on conversion to world religions in general, and to religious 'fundamentalist' movements in particular. Conversion is almost exclusively studied in view of "variables that either encourage or inhibit" it (Wood 1993: 307-8). Scholars are interested in finding out the *causes* of conversion – and connect these, as I discussed in the introduction, to converts' socio-economic circumstances – but they are largely unconcerned with what people might come to see in the religion they have embraced as time goes on<sup>1</sup>. Conversion is generally thought about and represented, in my view, as too flat an event.

Explanations of initial conversion, however, sometimes build on knowledge that converts to a religious movement only acquire *after* they have become involved.

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<sup>1</sup> See the contributions in Caplan (ed) 1987, Barker, J. (ed) 1990, Hefner (ed) 1993. Several authors, including Hefner in his contribution to the above volume (1993b: 117, 120-21) have mentioned the need to differentiate between unfolding levels of the conversion process and religious involvement (Heirich 1977: 654, Snow and Machalek 1983: 261-264, Barker, E. 1984: 8, Meyer 1998: 320), but none of them has discussed the issue in any depth, or focused on meaning beyond initial conversion.

Westermarck in his analysis of Seventh-day Adventism among the Agarabi of Papua New Guinea, for example, argues that the Adventist interpretation of every historical event in relation to the Great Controversy between God and Satan provides people with a satisfying framework to relocate themselves in a time of rapid social change. However, this is an interpretation they only develop once there are inside the church. Nevertheless, Westermarck suggests that it is this new historical consciousness that the Adventist church offers which explains why they *join*, and which explains the extraordinary growth of the church in Papua New Guinea in the 1990s (Westermarck 1998).

Not only do we need to distinguish between initial conversion and what happens afterwards from an analytical point of view, but also to recognise that the reasons behind initial conversion are often much less clear than in the conversion stories summarised above. My informants were often ambiguous themselves as to what exactly made them *join* the Seventh-day Adventist church. Little Filiette's parents gave me two completely different accounts of their motivation to join the Adventist church at different times. When I first asked them to tell me their conversion story, Papan' i Filiette praised the sufficient time for Bible study (*tena le ampy tsara be le fianarana*) of Seventh-day Adventist practice. One month later when we again spoke about the subject, he nodded emphatically as his wife recalled how the ancestors had failed to cure little Filiette of illness, and how she recovered after they had joined the Adventist church.

It seems to me that in many, if not most, cases, it is almost impossible to know why someone actually joined a particular religious movement at a particular moment in time. And we also have to bear in mind that the explicit accounts people give may be retrospective reconstructions of what was going on at the time they are recalling (Jules-Rosette 1975, Snow and Machalek 1983: 266-269).

Not only is it difficult to know the reasons behind religious conversion, but initial motivation is only the beginning of a story, and it seems to me not necessarily its most interesting part. Even if it is clear, as in the case of my host family in Sahameloka, why certain people have decided to join the Adventist church, this says very little about the nature of their long-term commitment to it. For example, does Claude's recovery explain what motivates him as well as his parents to remain in the church almost a decade afterwards? Does it explain why his father was willing to offend the elders of his ancestry so badly at the time of his father's exhumation? I do not think so.

As a result of these considerations, I have found it much more fruitful to concentrate on what being a practising Seventh-day Adventist *comes to mean* to people once they have joined the church, than trying to establish the “variables that either encourage or inhibit” conversion (Wood 1993: 307-8). The story I have therefore told in this thesis concerns the value of Seventh-day Adventism to the members of the church in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka at the time when I lived with them. In that sense, it is not a study of religious conversion, but a study of commitment.

### **The process of studying, the dis-covery of the truth, and the end of doubt**

In the course of this thesis, I have presented ethnography documenting the eagerness and the enthusiasm with which the members of the church in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka engage in Bible study both in church and at home, and the pleasure they take in being involved in a process of studying aimed at comprehension of the material studied. I have illustrated the Socratic nature of their involvement and I have suggested that we might want to think of them as Kuhnian normal scientists.

As I have stressed, and want to emphasise once more, the Adventists I know take pleasure in the very process of studying. And indeed my first and principal conclusion is that the key attraction of Adventism for church members in my fieldsites is the excitement of the studying process *in its own right*.

Starting from this principal conclusion, one also needs to ask, however, *why* the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka should be so interested in Bible study in the first place. In the following pages, I attempt to give an answer to this question.

In chapter 10, I have used Kuhn’s metaphor of solving a jigsaw puzzle to illustrate the significance of the *process* of studying, rather than any novel *outcome*, for church members in my fieldsites. However, the Seventh-day Adventists do not only derive joy from the process of *doing* the jigsaw, but they are also excited to see the picture develop and grow. And I believe that they are also motivated in what they are doing by the anticipated satisfaction of seeing the entire picture in its full size and in all its colours and shapes. People get a taste of that satisfaction every time they find a new piece which fits, every time they feel they understand more of what they read about in

the Bible and their Study Guide. A bag full of muddled jigsaw pieces, to borrow Kuhn's metaphor once again, contains the entire picture, yet we cannot see it without making the effort of turning over every piece and putting it in its right place. The whole picture the Seventh-day Adventists want to see is, quite simply, the truth: the truth about the world and life beyond, and about human nature. The truth is there available in the Bible, but we cannot see it unless we study what the Bible says. Hence to study the Bible is to make the picture appear; it is the road leading to the completion of the jigsaw.

But why is it such hard work to get at the truth? The problem is not that the truth is intrinsically unknowable. The problem is that the truth has been intentionally hidden – by Satan and his instruments on earth such as the mainstream churches. As we saw in chapter 7, for the Seventh-day Adventists, Satan is neither abstract nor distant. Rather, people are directly confronted with his presence and power in their lives. When the Catholics and Protestants go to church on Sunday for example, they fall prey to Satan's deception, because the truth is that God wants us to worship on Saturday. But it is only when one actually *reads* Exodus 20 that one realizes that that is so. Similarly, when people exhume their dead as they traditionally do in Maroantsetra, they act on the grounds of an illusion that they are actually dealing with their dead kin, while in reality, they are cooperating with the Devil who masquerades as their ancestors.

The truth has been covered by Satan's lies about ancestral efficacy, about Sunday worship, about evolution and many other things. Therefore, studying the Bible is to literally un-cover the truth buried beneath Satan's veil of lies. To study the Bible is to penetrate through a mist of deception, to remove the Satanic veil which blurs our perception of reality. Seventh-day Adventist practice is like an "archeological process" (Caplan 1987a: 17). The archeologist knows that the vase is in the ground, yet she has to dig it free by hard work, effort and patience. Bible study, conducted in a Socratic style, is to unearth the vase, and to bring it into the open for everyone to see.

Parry has discussed how in the Brahmanical tradition knowledge is "recovered" from sacred texts rather than "discovered" (Parry 1985: 205). The Brahman's engagement with text is not a matter of creating new knowledge, but a matter of accessing knowledge that has long been revealed by the gods. This is also true for the Seventh-day Adventists since the truth is readily available in the Bible. In contrast to the Brahmans, however, they have a distinctive sense of having to rescue the truth from

beneath a cover which has been intentionally laid upon it – the cover of Satan’s deception. In that sense, they have to un-cover the truth. That is the ultimate aim. The road, however, which leads to the truth being fully un-covered and brought into the light is a process of scientific discovery. It is a process of discovering, that is understanding, all the bits and pieces the truth is made up of. It is a process of discovering *why* one has to respect the Holy Sabbath, *why* one must not speak to dead people, *why* one must not drink alcohol, *why* there is so much evil in the world and above all, *why* one must study the Bible. It is this journey that the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka are first and foremost fascinated and motivated by.

As long as people are misled, they fall prey to Satan’s control over their minds and, as a result, their actions. Thus penetrating through the mist of Satan’s deception is to shed that control. Hence it is to gain potency. It is to gain the potency of seeing beneath the veil of falseness and of seeing reality as it is, laid bare.

This potency of being in control, of being on top of things, is precisely what the *vazaha* (essentially White foreigners) are thought to have much more of than the Malagasy (recall people’s questions concerning the solar eclipse). And as I illustrated in the previous chapter, the perceived basis of this potency of the *vazaha* is the fact that they have studied, of which the ability to read and write well is the visible epitome. Thus it makes perfect sense for the Malagasy Seventh-day Adventists to engage in the activity of studying *as a road* towards seeing behind Satan’s veil and thus becoming potent. Even if perhaps the Seventh-day Adventists see themselves as still at the beginning of this process of discovering and un-covering the truth, of shedding Satan’s control and of becoming potent, they have – as I quoted earlier – “a sense of having the right road map” (Ammerman 1994b: 149, writing on Christian ‘fundamentalists’).

In the previous chapter, I emphasised that people in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka perceive the *fahaizana* (knowledge, capability) of *vazaha* not only in real terms (*vazaha* can make cameras which take pictures all by themselves), but that the exclamation “The *vazaha* have *fahaizana*!” evokes a potency of a very general nature. And this is also true for the kind of potency the Seventh-day Adventists approach through Bible study. They are perfectly aware that studying the Bible will not tell them how to build an airplane or even how to produce a musical card. The potency they aspire to is the *intellectual* potency of seeing behind Satan’s veil of deception.

The kind of potency the *vazaha* are thought to have is of course not at all the same as the specifically Seventh-day Adventist potency of breaking through Satan's veil of deception. But the *method* which is thought to lead to potency is the same, and that method is to study (*mianatra*). *Mianatra* is the road towards understanding and mastering things. The Adventists go along this road, yet they take a specifically Adventist turning at a certain point. And the potency they gradually achieve by travelling along this road of studying has a specifically Adventist quality and is interpreted in a specifically Adventist way. It is interpreted as the intellectual potency to penetrate Satan's web of lies.

The idea of knowledge being intentionally hidden from people is not new to anthropology. Many studies on cargo cults, particularly in Melanesia have pointed to exactly that perception. Josephides (1982) in her comparative study of Seventh-day Adventism and local cargo cults in a Papua New Guinea context demonstrates the presence of the idea of knowledge being hidden from Papuans in both. I would, however, like to stress a crucial difference between interpretations of cargo cults and the argument I am making here. While cargo cults, as their name suggests, seem to be at least partly motivated by a desire for Western *goods* (Worsley 1970 [1957], Burridge 1960, Josephides 1982), the attraction of Seventh-day Adventism for the Malagasy members of the church I know does not lie in anything material, but as I said in the *intellectual* potency which is thought to result from Bible study.

As I discussed in chapter 10, Seventh-day Adventist self-definition is based on having a particular kind of *knowledge*, that is true knowledge unclouded by the Devil's lies – knowledge dis-covered, knowledge un-covered. By studying the Bible, church members become increasingly knowledgeable of the truth and their minds are no longer obscured. This is why Papan' i Monde expresses his conversion experience in terms of moving from "being like somebody who is unconscious" to suddenly "waking up from sleep". And as we have seen, church members do not think of what it means to become convinced of Adventism so much as a matter of *finoana* (trust/belief), but a matter of having started to *understand* the truth. Hence their bafflement at my failure to get baptised. By choosing God, the Seventh-day Adventists choose clarity of mind.



In chapter 7, I have already briefly discussed the concept of *mazava* (clarity), and it has cropped up again and again in various places in the present thesis. Here I need to explore this word in some more detail. As I stated in chapter 7, *mazava* captures a very powerful notion with a variety of meanings which are all associated with clarity and light. It can refer to having understood a particular thing in a perfectly straightforward sense. For example, when people explained a Malagasy word to me, which I did not know yet, they would inquire, at the end of their explanation, whether that word was now *mazava* to me or not, whether I had understood what it meant. *Mazava* also refers to open space. As I mentioned earlier, the world ‘beyond the sea’ (*andafy*) is frequently spoken of as *mazava* referring both to physical appearance (no forest, lots of open space) and the idea that the environment is under human control. Bloch (1995a) has discussed the notion of clarity (*mazava*) among the Zafimaniry of Madagascar, showing that the Zafimaniry like the idea of clearing the forest and viewing open space so much, because it is a way for people to leave their mark on the land and thus, to a certain extent, control the environment. Furthermore, for the Malagasy Adventists, *mazava* also means the clarity of mind I discussed above, that is the intellectual potency to see behind Satan’s veil of deception covering the truth. And finally, *mazava* used as a noun means ‘the truth’, and indeed God. In this sense, the Seventh-day Adventists contrast ‘the *mazava*’ with ‘the *maizina*’, which is darkness, ignorance and the Devil. To study the Bible which, as we have seen, is the road towards truth, is thus to move from a self-perceived state of ignorance and illusion towards life in an ‘enlightened’ world, towards clarity. In Malagasy terms: from *maizina* towards *mazava*.

Light as a metaphor of the Christian faith, and Darkness as its opposite, obviously echoes nineteenth-century missionary rhetoric (Peel 2000: 169). However, the Seventh-day Adventists see themselves as moving towards an ‘enlightened’ world in more than one sense. In the sense of moving towards truth, they are well within the bounds of orthodox Christianity. But their view of an enlightened world, of the *mazava* they are moving towards, goes much further.

In the last section of chapter 10, I discussed in detail two future moments in time foretold by Seventh-day Adventist doctrine, namely the events during the millennium, and the nature of life in Paradise thereafter. I concluded that what moves the members of the Adventist church most about Paradise and salvation is the anticipation of seeing

things clearly, the anticipation of the end of doubt, rather than the promise of bliss. During the millennium, God will explain, and provide proof of, his justice. And in Paradise, people will actually see Him sitting on His throne.

The implications of this notion are highly significant. Because if everything is absolutely *mazava* (clear, beyond doubt) to everyone, then there is no more need for *finoana* (belief based on trusting God's authority) in anything. And this is precisely what Papan' i Emilie expressed in his answer to my question about what exactly he liked about Paradise:

‘There will be no more *finoana*. One sees God with one's own eyes (*hita maso*)! That's what I like. One doesn't doubt any longer (*tsy misalasala intsony*). Here on earth human beings always doubt, they ask themselves ‘what is true? what is not true?’, but in Paradise there will be no more doubt.’

However, for the time being – that is before Christ's return, the millennium and life in Paradise thereafter – one has no option but to trust/believe in (*mino*) the truth of the Bible, one has no option but to accept it on God's authority. But trust always involves an element, or at least the possibility, of doubt – just as I hesitated for a second to clench my fists when Papan' i Beby held a thorny branch under my nose and told me to close my eyes – and as Papan' i Emilie emphasises in the above statement. It is this element of doubt which the Seventh-day Adventists want to remove; they want to open their eyes and see the truth clearly. The irony of the issue of doubt is of course that the notion of the end of *finoana* (trust/belief) is itself a matter of *finoana*, as defined by my informants, and, as such, subject to doubt.

The Seventh-day Adventists' search for true knowledge echoes the Christian idea of faith leading out of Darkness and towards Light. At the same time, it also accords well with the Malagasy notion of clarity. However, the Adventists' definition of *mazava* as discussed above departs from both. And, indeed, their notion of the nature of the religion they have embraced departs from what is normally thought of as (world) religion, in particular in modern Christianity.

### What kind of religion is it?

Asad has convincingly demonstrated that the idea of there being such a thing as religion, of which one can find different manifestations in cultures around the world – the idea of religion having “an autonomous essence” (1993b: 28) – is a product of the history of European Christianity (Asad 1993b). Therefore, the attempt to define ‘Religion’ independently of particular social and historical contexts is an ethnocentric non-starter. Asad identifies three conceptual shifts with regard to the nature of Christianity which took place in the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe. One of these is of particular interest for the present discussion. This is the shift from a concept of Christianity as founded on *knowledge* of doctrine and particular texts as well as the life of saints and so on, to a concept of Christianity as founded on *belief* in God and a superhuman realm more generally. Belief in this modern sense is a matter of private conscience, an inner state (Needham 1972) concerning things whose truthfulness is thought not to be empirically accessible. It is a mysterious matter of the heart and as such, cannot be argued for or against rationally.

Pouillon, among others, has noted that the very concept of believing in the sense defined above only makes sense within a modern Christian framework based on the duality between an empirically accessible world and another transcendental world which is not empirically accessible and which one therefore has to believe in (Pouillon 1982 [1979]). Many cultures, which he calls monistic, do not make such a distinction. This is precisely what Kopytoff (1997 [1968]) demonstrated in regard to African ancestors, pointing out that it is misleading to speak of ‘belief’ in ancestors, since these are basically perceived of, and treated, in the same way as elders, except that they are dead. And as noted earlier, Malagasy ethnography confirms this point, because Malagasy people do not relate to their ancestors as entities they *believe in*, but as dead forebears they communicate with in particular circumstances. Many scholars, among them Pouillon, have recognised that the notion of belief, in the modern sense, often makes little sense in such places. Asad, however, has shown that the preoccupation with belief as a private matter of the heart is not only a specifically Christian phenomenon, but it is a Christian concept which only developed from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

I have said above that Seventh-day Adventist practice and thought, as I observed it among the congregations in my fieldsites, departs from what we now normally think of

as (world) religion. By that I mean that for the Seventh-day Adventists I know, religion is not at all based on this modern notion of belief as an inner state concerning matter whose substance is not empirically knowable. Instead, it is much closer to what religion was thought to be in the Middle Ages.

First of all, and most importantly, as the ethnography presented in this thesis demonstrates, the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka emphasise the activity of Bible study, the acquisition of knowledge, and the development of understanding and comprehension of Biblical truth as being the core of their religion.

Second, when church members do speak of *finoana* (or *mino*), which I have translated as trust/belief, they do not refer to a notion of belief in the modern sense as defined by Asad. While modern Christian belief is beyond any empirically knowable reality, since it is an inner state, for the Malagasy Seventh-day Adventists, *finoana* denotes trust in a reality which, unfortunately, one has not seen with one's own eyes yet (*tsy hita maso*). Thus for the time being, one has no option but to trust in the authority of the Bible as God's word. But the subject of *finoana* is not intrinsically unknowable, nor is it, unlike the substance of belief in the modern Christian sense, of an essentially different nature to things one has seen with one's eyes. Recall the significance of the notion of *proof* for the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, which I discussed in chapter 10, and the statement that "true things have proof" (*misy porofo ny zavatra marina*). And recall the idea of God *proving* His justice during the millennium which the Adventists emphasise, and their expectation of life in Paradise as beyond doubt. *Finoana* (trust/belief) is the only possible road towards complete clarity and an undisturbed vision of reality (*mazava*), but *finoana* is not belief as an inner state, but trust in the promise that knowledge of the truth will be revealed.

The distinction between this and another world, and the promise of a better life in a transcendental world, has been described as the key attraction of world religions (Hefner 1993a: 34), and also of salvationist movements such as Seventh-day Adventism. Yet for the Adventists in my fieldsites, life in Paradise does not imply a vision of a mysterious or supernatural world – of another world – but of a world as real and empirically accessible (*mazava*) as planting rice is in this world. For them, the very distinction becomes obsolete and the typically modern Christian dualist worldview is not applicable. In that sense, the Adventists share a conception of the world typical of non-

Christian Malagasy cultures and many others which do not distinguish between a realm one knows and another one believes in.

Christianity is not new in Madagascar and not new to most of my informants. What is new to them, however, is the idea that what Catholics and Protestants think of as 'the transcendental', and as such intrinsically unknowable, is actually of exactly the same nature as the activity of farming or the material reality of the house across the street, and as such completely this-worldly in the Weberian sense. And the Seventh-day Adventists are also this-world-oriented in that the core of their religion, both practically and theoretically, is an activity in this world, namely Bible study.

In short, although Seventh-day Adventism is a modern phenomenon, it clearly departs from what Pouillon and Asad describe as the modern notion of religion, in that it is *not* concerned with the inner state of believing in the transcendental. Instead, it is concerned with knowledge of empirically accessible truth. Thus, we have an example of a group of people at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, who adhere to a global doctrine produced in 19<sup>th</sup> century America, who have a concept of religion typical of the European Middle Ages in that it is based on knowledge, rather than belief. However, unlike what was the case in the European Middle Ages, the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka do not accept *human authority* of Bible interpretation, but instead view the process of knowledge acquisition as fundamentally egalitarian and participatory<sup>2</sup>.

Un-covering the truth by penetrating the mist of Satan's deception, and the image of complete clarity are meaningful concepts connected to Bible study which may at least partly explain *why* the Seventh-day Adventists are so interested in studying the Bible.

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<sup>2</sup> One of the recurring features in definitions of 'fundamentalism' is anti-secularism. This means precisely that people we think of as 'fundamentalists' are against the separation between a religious and a secular sphere. Although it is not usually presented in these terms, this implies that 'fundamentalists' critique the modern Christian dualist view of the cosmos. The incorporation of 'science' into 'religion' which has been noted as typical of 'fundamentalists' in general by several authors (Spuhler 1985, Caplan 1987a: 11-12, Mendelsohn 1993, Moore 1993, Tibi 1993), makes this clear. Thus, for Papan' i Beby, French Virgin stores opening on Sundays is not secular news, but a manifestation of God's fight against Satan. Therefore, one could say that the Seventh-day Adventists are radically 'secular', except that this only makes sense in terms of the dichotomy of the religious and the secular which is of course precisely what they reject.

But as I have emphasised throughout this thesis, it is the activity of Bible study itself which lies at the heart of what Seventh-day Adventism means to the people concerned in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka.

It is precisely because of the Seventh-day Adventists' interest in, and enthusiasm for, the activity of Bible study and the joy they derive from it, that much of the available literature on (Christian) 'fundamentalism' has failed to help me understand the phenomenon I study. But before I discuss this literature in the light of the presented ethnography, I want to make one comment on contemporary approaches to conversion to world religions more generally.

### **Indigenisation and innovation**

The contemporary discussion of conversion is much concerned with issues of domination and agency. In response to an earlier focus on conversion to Christianity and other world religions as an expression of foreign domination and the loss of indigenous religious traditions (Barker 1990a), analysts now stress the agency of converts and how, far from being passive recipients of incoming religions, they absorb these in many creative ways and in the course change and adapt them to local concepts<sup>3</sup>. This process of "indigenisation" (Barker 1990a: 9, 1990b: 260) is the main focus of many recent studies on conversion<sup>4</sup>.

The theoretical position supported by the majority of contemporary writers on conversion to world religions is closely linked to their concern with agency. While Weber's classic study (1956), and several subsequent ones (e.g. Geertz 1973) focused on the reasons for the impressive success of world religions<sup>5</sup>, recent ethnographies not only analyse why people do convert, but also why in certain circumstances they do not (see e.g. the contributions by Hefner, Keyes, Merrill, Pollock, Yengoyan in Hefner (ed) 1993). The answers given in the contemporary literature on conversion exhibit a strong

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<sup>3</sup> Although the Comaroffs focus on the dynamic relationship between Christian and local concepts and on their mutual influence, in the final analysis, theirs is a model of foreign domination and imperialism (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991, 1992, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> See the volume edited by Barker, J. 1990; Jordan 1993, Wood 1993, Swanson 1994; concerning Seventh-day Adventism see Miyazaki 2000.

<sup>5</sup> For a good review of studies in this field, in particular Weber's theory of world religions' superior rationalisation, see Hefner 1993a. Also see Ikenga-Methu (1987).

tendency to explain successful or failed conversion, as the case may be, as dependent on the *compatibility*<sup>6</sup> of incoming religion and local tradition<sup>7</sup>. In cases of success, important local concepts and/or practices are said to be compatible with those of the incoming world religion and thus the process of indigenisation can begin.

Rafael, however, has demonstrated that the indigenisation of Christianity, Catholicism in the case he studies, can involve fundamental misunderstandings between those who bring Christianity and those who apparently embrace it, to the extent that what is being incorporated is in fact hardly recognisable as Catholicism (1993 [1988]). This insight has led many contemporary analysts of religious conversion to stress that the changes brought about by conversion to world religions may be much less radical than it at first appears (again, see the volumes by Barker (ed) 1990 and Hefner (ed) 1993). This conclusion echoes the concern of the early missionaries as to whether or not the 'natives' had truly adopted Christ's word rather than just, say, the ritual of baptism (Peel 2000: 203). But many more recent and contemporary studies of conversion to world religions, too, take the criterion of *belief* as the yardstick against which they measure the extent of genuine conversion<sup>8</sup>. In cases of failed attempts at converting people to Christianity or other world religions, local tradition and incoming religion are interpreted as fundamentally incompatible.

The attempt not to ignore the agency of those who embrace Christianity and other world religions is certainly laudable<sup>9</sup>. And with regard to the case I study, it is indeed easy to see the continuity between several aspects of Seventh-day Adventism and Malagasy concepts. I have discussed at least two: the notion of taboo (*fady*), and the

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<sup>6</sup> Although this is not usually recognised, Horton's theory of conversion in Africa was based precisely on such compatibility (Horton 1971, 1975). Horton claimed that Christianity and Islam were so successful in Africa because they corresponded well with African two-tiered cosmology which incorporates both local spirits and a Supreme Being similar to God or Allah. Ikenga-Methu has pointed out that Horton's model was welcomed by many at the time because it gave Africans agency (Ikenga-Methu 1987: 15).

<sup>7</sup> See Gordon 1990; Jordan, Keyes, Merrill, Pollock, Wood, Yengoyan in Hefner 1993; Swanson 1994; concerning Seventh-day Adventism see Josephides 1982, Owusa-Mensa 1993.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Fisher 1973, Snow and Mackalek 1983, Clendinnen 1987, contributions in Hefner 1993 (except for Merrill who criticises this focus on belief). See also Peel 2000 for a critique of the definition of conversion based on "heartfelt inner conviction" (2000: 203); rather, Peel proposes social identification as "the only *workable* definition of conversion" (p. 216, emphasis in the original; also p. 203, 211, 249).

<sup>9</sup> Asad (1993a), however, has criticised this focus on agency as ethnocentric.

significance of the written word and of literacy, although we have also noted how the Adventists' relationship to their Bibles departs from widely held local notions relating to books in general. On the basis of the ethnography presented in this thesis, one could also argue that the Adventists do not give up the *concept* of ancestral power, but that they merely add an extra twist turning ancestral into Satanic power. Or one could highlight the significance of sacrifice in the traditional culture as well as within the Adventist doctrine, as indeed Papan' i Beby once explicitly pointed out to a Sabbath School group he was chairing. And one could look at the Seventh-day Adventists' concept of *finoana* (trust/belief) as continuous with non-Christian Malagasy cultures which, as noted above, do not have a modern notion of belief in supernaturals.

As I stated earlier on, it would certainly be wrong to ignore such continuities and I do think that one has to understand Adventist practice in this light. However, the data presented here suggests that many analysts may *overemphasise* the extent to which Christian religions are modified so as to be compatible with local traditions. To be sure, there must be certain "points of contact" (Peel 2000: 179) between incoming and recipient cultures which enable a dialogue. If there were no such dialogue, then conversion would indeed be extremely unlikely. At the same time though, we should not deny the possibility of radical change and innovation. Hefner writes in his introduction to "Conversion to Christianity":

"Having refuted the myth of the Christian monolith ... we must not fall into the converse error of extreme cultural particularism, so thoroughly deconstructing Christianity as to conclude that it is really no more than a congeries of local traditions" (1993a: 5).

Yet at least half of the contributions to the volume take precisely that point of view<sup>10</sup>. In the case of the Seventh-day Adventists in the district of Maroantsetra, conversion has meant *genuine* change. I do not base this judgement on the criterion of adoption of new beliefs. Indeed, as I pointed out in chapter 10, joining the Adventist church does not, primarily, introduce new beliefs (many Catholics and Protestants as



well accept the Bible as literally true), but it is the beginning of Bible study. Rather, my judgement is based on the Adventists' radical reinterpretation of 'Malagasy traditions' relating to one's ancestors (*fomba gasy, fomban-drazana*). It is also based on their adoption of an explanatory framework offered to them by the Adventist church which explains everything with reference to the Great Controversy between God and Satan. Having said that, it is important to recognise that such an adoption of a clearly imported notion does not deny people their agency, for it is they who chose to take it on board. And finally, my judgement that conversion to Seventh-day Adventism in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka has implied genuine change is based on the realization that to conclude otherwise would be to fail to acknowledge the radical nature of the Adventists' position within Malagasy society and the radical challenge they pose to tradition in practice. It would be to fail to recognise what Papan' i Claude did when he refused to eat with his kin at his father's exhumation. It is for these reasons that I claim that Seventh-day Adventism, as I observed it, is *not* a matter of pouring new wine into old bottles, but involves a true paradigm shift. I do not intend to dismiss theoretical approaches which emphasise compatibility and indigenisation; I simply want to suggest that, in this case at least, one must not underestimate the level of innovation either.

### Religious 'fundamentalism'

In the introduction to this thesis, I have summarised what I consider to be the gist of contemporary approaches to religious 'fundamentalism'. I appreciate that, although this field of analysis is still in its infancy, there have been remarkable changes over the course of the past twenty years which has significantly advanced our understanding of "fundamentalism-like" (Marty and Appleby 1995: 16) movements. However, there are in my view several difficulties and insufficiencies regarding this literature which I now want to discuss in light of the ethnography presented in this thesis. As in the introduction, I will first critically discuss *definitions* of religious 'fundamentalism', and then move on to how analysts have *explained* such phenomena, although, as I mentioned in the introduction, definition and explanation are often one and the same which in fact makes many arguments circular.

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<sup>10</sup> Jordan, Keyes, Merrill, Pollock, Yengoyan. But see Barker's contribution to Hefner's volume

In the great majority of cases, religious ‘fundamentalism’ is defined – here one has to remember that most theoretical approaches are based on comparative data from Christian, Jewish and Islamic ‘fundamentalisms’ – as a reaction against the disruption, or loss, of traditional identities and securities brought about by the impact of globalisation and secular modernity. Fundamentalists, it is argued, are “guardians of tradition” (Marty 1992: 19), either of an indigenous tradition they perceive to be under threat and are determined to defend, or of a newly adopted tradition, such as Pentecostalism or Seventh-day Adventism, which is perceived to offer new guidance and direction at a time of socio-economic turmoil.

The case I study does not fit this definition on several grounds. First, although I have tried, I have been unable to see in what way exactly Maroantsetra or Sahameloka have recently undergone the kind of ‘rapid social change’ endlessly referred to in the literature as the trigger of conversion to religious ‘fundamentalist’ movements. I have not seen any indication that the microcosm of people either in town or in the village has recently been shattered. Of course, there have been changes, but every society always changes at all times which is why an explanation such as Westermarck’s that “sectarian religious groups like the Adventists ... offer ... social bonding *in changing societies*” (1998: 57, emphasis added) seems empty. Of course, rapid social and economic change may be a key factor in explaining the rise of ‘fundamentalism’ in certain circumstances, for example in the context of Latin American megacities and other urban contexts where people find themselves torn from everything they knew before. But as the case of Seventh-day Adventism in the area of Maroantsetra – a predominantly rural phenomenon – illustrates, dramatic socio-economic change cannot be *generalised* as a key definitional feature of ‘fundamentalist’ movements.

Second, as I discussed in chapter 6, the Adventist church in my fieldsites does not provide a new community for those who have lost a traditional one, on the contrary. As we have seen, church members continue to rely on traditional kinship networks and at the same time fail to provide each other with significant support. Neither has there been any loss of traditional support among kin prior to people converting to Adventism,

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for a careful analysis in this respect.

nor do kin networks, in most cases, fall apart thereafter, despite the serious challenge they are put to as a result of the Adventists not practising *fomban-drazana*.

And third, membership of the Adventist church in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka does not provide people, as the literature would lead one to expect, with a new and clear sense of identity in the face of the loss of traditional identities. But as my discussion in chapter 7 has shown, Adventism opens up a new discursive possibility of being part of a global church community, and sometimes going as far as, by implication, not being Malagasy. However, the Malagasy members of the church oscillate between such an imagination of themselves as non-Malagasy on the one hand, and of being *Malagasy* Seventh-day Adventists on the other. The former imagination only comes to the fore at certain moments.

I would also like to mention two other recurring features of definitions of religious ‘fundamentalism’ which I cannot confirm with regard to my data, namely hierarchical structures of authority and the reinforcement of patriarchal gender roles. Although both these features may *theoretically* apply to Seventh-day Adventism, and when looked at as a global movement with a globally applicable doctrine, neither enjoys any popularity among ordinary members of the Adventist church in either Sahameloka or Maroantsetra. As I discussed in chapter 4, there is on the contrary a very strong emphasis on equality of all church members, including the pastor and elected lay leaders, and participation of all, and in daily practice, this includes both women and men.

In accordance with the widely accepted definition of ‘fundamentalism’ summarised above, analysts have almost exclusively focused on the socio-economic position of converts when trying to explain the recent extraordinary growth of ‘fundamentalist’ movements many have noted. In other words, in order to explain *why* certain people feel attracted to certain movements, analysts have investigated *who* these people are, suggesting a direct link between the ‘who?’ and the ‘why?’. Concerning the question as to what *kind of people* are particularly likely to join ‘fundamentalist’ movements, the available literature gives an astonishingly homogenous answer. In a nutshell, it is people who, for some reason or another, feel marginalised or disoriented in the society in which they live, and who thus seek an alternative route to integration through membership of a ‘fundamentalist’ movement. Because it is particularly the socio-economically weak – and in some cases aspiring middle classes – who are

negatively affected by the rapid social and economic change which characterises today's globalised world, it is they who make up the vast majority of converts to religious 'fundamentalist' movements.

However, this answer is entirely unsatisfactory, because the presumed link between socio-economic position and *motivation* to be part of a movement has not been demonstrated convincingly. Indeed, the literature on religious 'fundamentalism' is characterised by a lack of *evidence* for the claims made, and a marked absence of the voices of the people concerned (Bruce 2000: 110-117). Referring to studies on resistance in general, Sherry Ortner has noted that such studies are more often than not "thin ethnographically ... thin on the subjectivity – the intentions, desires, fears, projects – of the actors engaged in these dramas" (1995: 190)<sup>11</sup>. This is also true for studies on religious 'fundamentalism' which mostly fail, and often do not even attempt to, provide any *evidence* that the explanatory factors established are even remotely meaningful to the practitioners of such movements.

What strikes me most when I read literature on religious 'fundamentalism' is that what the members of a particular church are actually *doing*, and what they say is meaningful to them, is often simply ignored. The circumstances – as indeed the term *circumstances* suggests: that which *surrounds* the centre – are given priority over the *content* and the *substance* of 'fundamentalist' thought and practice, which are almost always seen as a means to an end, as a cover underneath which there lies the 'true' cause of attraction (socio-economic deprivation, alienation from social networks and so on). There are only very few exceptions<sup>12</sup> to this widespread tendency of analysts to look for supposedly deeper causes and meaning than what the people concerned claim they are up to, and what one can observe they are interested in, if one spends any time with them. In Bruce's critical words:

"They appear to be concerned with one thing (...) but are 'really' concerned about something else (their own precarious position). ... The

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<sup>11</sup> Jean Comaroff's analysis of South African Zionism (1985) is in my view the clearest example of such a study.

protagonists misunderstand what really bothers them” (Bruce 2000: 114-115).

Let me illustrate my position with regard to my own fieldwork data. Generally speaking, the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka are people who could be described as marginal. They are marginal on a global scale – they live in one of the poorest countries of the world; they are marginal within Madagascar – they live in a geographically remote and politically insignificant place; and they are locally marginal in that, again generally speaking, they are among the poor of the district. Moreover, many of them, but by no means all, are of slave descent, as I discussed at the beginning of this thesis. An explanation of Adventism pointing to issues of social marginality would seem particularly attractive with regard to Sahameloka where not only are the majority of the inhabitants of slave descent, but where, at the same time, the Adventist church has recently been extraordinarily successful.

However, as I discussed in chapter 3, as soon as one begins to look at the actual distribution of converts to Adventism among the village’s ancestries, the picture becomes rather less clear, and there is no clear evidence of a link between being of slave descent, on the one hand, and the likelihood of joining the Adventist church, on the other. But there is no clear evidence showing the contrary either. Therefore, let us assume for a moment, as may well be true in other cases, that people of slave descent in the area of Maroantsetra are indeed particularly likely to become Seventh-day Adventists. What could the church possibly offer them?

The ethnography I have presented in this thesis suggests that what church members, among them those of slave descent from Sahameloka, find attractive with regard to their involvement in the Adventist church is first and foremost *active participation* on various levels. It is true that because of their marginal position in society – of which slave descent is a particularly clear case – most of them are denied such participation in many areas of society. The mainstream churches, for example, do not offer any position other than that of passive listener to people such as Papan’ i

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<sup>12</sup> Notable exceptions are Harding 1987, 1992, 1994 and Bruce 1992, 2000. Heirich 1977 (on conversion in general), Levine (1995) and Lehmann (1998) have also voiced their critical attitude towards purely sociological explanations.

Fredel. As Papan' i Beby once remarked, only the rich have any say within the Catholic and the Protestant church. Whether or not this is objectively true, and whether or not it is objectively true that the Protestants for example never read the Bible, is not my concern here. What Papan' i Beby's statement reflects is what the members of the Adventist church feel to be the case, and how they remember their personal experience as Catholics or Protestants. Recall Papan' i Filiette's disappointment over the fact that the money which the Protestant congregation he was a leader of had collected to build a new church, was eventually claimed by the centre in Maroantsetra ('then came a letter from above'). Despite the fact that he was a lay leader of the local congregation, he was powerless to do anything against this. But participation is not only an issue of having a say. Papan' i Beby's case illustrates this clearly. Because of the relative poverty of his family, he became a civil servant rather than a scientist or a university professor as, I am sure, he would have loved to become, had he had the opportunity. While it is true that his involvement with the Adventist church has somehow 'made up' for these unfulfilled dreams, and that the fact that they have remained unfulfilled is largely due to his socio-economic position, neither explains his thirst for intellectual engagement *in the first place*.

In other words, the Adventist church may be very appealing to socio-economically marginal people, because it offers such people participation in decision-making processes, as well as participation on an intellectual level, which they are otherwise denied precisely because of their marginal position in society. But as Weber emphasised a hundred years ago, discussing the relationship between Calvinism and the emergence of modern capitalism (Weber 1920 [1904/05]), this is a matter of elective affinity (*Wahlverwandtschaft*) rather than a *causal* relationship.

As Levine has noted in somewhat different words (1995: 170-172), there is a general tendency in the literature on religious 'fundamentalism' to *essentialise* converts as persons of a particular socio-economic status, and to view and interpret *everything* such marginal people do with reference to that status. But one needs to remember that people of slave descent, for example, are more than *just* people of slave descent.

However, the main point I wish to make is the following. Let us assume that one could convincingly demonstrate a clear link between socio-economic marginality and membership of the Adventist church (which, however, would be difficult in the case I

study), and let us further assume that the Adventist church is particularly attractive to marginal members of society, because it does not exclude them from active participation, among other things. We still would not understand the actual attraction of Seventh-day Adventist *practice* and *thought* for the people concerned. We still would know little about the *meaning* church members derive from being *practising* Seventh-day Adventists.

As I said, what baffles and bothers me most about the focus on people's socio-economic position in the literature, is precisely that such explanations ignore the *content* of 'fundamentalist' practice. And as a result, they fail to tell us much about the nature of people's *commitment* to the religion they have embraced.

Perhaps most explanations of religious 'fundamentalism' are, at least in my view, so unsatisfactory, because they are intended to do justice to a great variety of greatly diverse phenomena. Even among Christian 'fundamentalisms', there are significant differences, let alone between, say, Christian and Islamic 'fundamentalist' movements. Pentecostalism and Seventh-day Adventism, for example, are usually both considered manifestations of religious 'fundamentalism' (although different terms such as Evangelicalism may be employed). However, these two types of 'fundamentalist' phenomena, it seems, could hardly be more different. Analysts of Pentecostalism emphasise the significance of *emotional* experience within the Pentecostal tradition – particularly in comparison to Liberation Theology in Latin American contexts (see e.g. Martin 1990, Corten 1999) – and claim that because of this focus on emotion, Pentecostal religions are particularly attractive to illiterate or semi-literate people who feel estranged by any focus on words and text. One author even notes that among Chilean Pentecostals "Any kind of learning beyond the literacy needed to read the Bible is frowned upon, and educated members who show intellectual interests or ambitions are watched with considerable suspicion" (Deiros 1991: 179)<sup>13</sup>. What I have found among the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka, and what I have documented in this thesis, is the exact opposite. I have found people who despite their lack of literacy and education are enthusiastic about studying and learning, and many of

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<sup>13</sup> On the anti-intellectualism of Latin American Pentecostals, also see Lehmann 1996: 220-221.

them are nothing short of intellectuals. Thus, how much sense does the analytic category of 'religious fundamentalism' actually make?

I do not wish to suggest that the socio-economic and political context within which converts to, or members of, particular religious movements are placed is irrelevant. I can think of several aspects relating to the socio-economic position of the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka which one might want to highlight. For example, one could make the following point. The Adventists share a general tendency of the Malagasy in many places to think of themselves, in particular in comparison to the *vazaha* (White foreigners), as not very knowledgeable people. Thus a person who studies the Bible and is seen wandering about with books which, as we have seen, are generally prestigious in Madagascar, may feel that he or she is transforming from being a nobody, to becoming a somebody. And especially so, because church members in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka are aware of the global nature of Seventh-day Adventism, and may find it prestigious to be part of a community which includes *vazaha*.

Or one could adopt Westermarck's analysis of Seventh-day Adventism in Papua New Guinea. According to Adventist doctrine, human history is a manifestation of the Great Controversy between God and Satan as I discussed in chapter 7. In particular the issue of Sabbath versus Sunday worship is of utmost importance in this respect. Thus by keeping the Holy Sabbath, Westermarck suggests, the Seventh-day Adventists in Papua New Guinea locate themselves right at the centre of world history. They move themselves from the periphery where they are socio-economically and geographically speaking situated, onto a centre-stage position (Westermarck 1998: 64)<sup>14</sup>. I accept that such an interpretation of history may make a lot of sense to someone who feels like a historical nobody. And with regard to the Seventh-day Adventists in my fieldsites, this would be particularly true for church members of slave descent.

In fact, the members of the church both in town and in the village explicitly identify with the Biblical Israelites, sometimes referring to them as their ancestors (*razana*), and to themselves as the descendants of Abraham (such instances might be moments when they imagine themselves not to be Malagasy). At the same time, it is

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<sup>14</sup> See also Harding 1987, 1992, 1994 for a related point.



often stressed – during discussions in church as well as at home – that the Biblical Israelites were *enslaved* by the Egyptians. Thus it could be the case that those Adventists who are of slave descent attempt, by identifying with the Biblical Israelites, to establish long lines of spiritual ancestors as a response to the shallowness of their own ancestral history, as I discussed chapter 2. And if the Israelites are perceived as their ancestors, then reading the Bible is to discover their own history. As Feeley-Harnik writes, to have history “is a sign of politico-religious power and authority” (1978: 402)<sup>15</sup>. It could be that in the Malagasy context where to have ancestors is so important, people with a shallow ancestral history, as is the case for many church members at least from Sahameloka, are particularly attracted to a religion which offers an alternative line of ancestors. And it is perhaps the very shallowness of their ancestral history which makes it easier for people of slave descent to stop caring for their ancestors by way of exhumation and cattle sacrifice. And because ancestral demands are often costly, they are particularly difficult to fulfil for people of slave descent who, because of their slave descent, are poor.

Although such an argument seems elegant and there may be some truth to it, there are at least three objections with regard to the particular case I study. First, I have not come across any *evidence*, other than the fact that church members sometimes identify with the Biblical Israelites, which would convincingly demonstrate the validity of the above argument; therefore it remains extremely speculative. Second, as I discussed in chapter 2, the descendants of slaves in the area of Maroantsetra are – in contrast to the situation for Betsileo slave descendants for example – *no longer* without ancestors, and they are *not* deprived of ancestral blessing and social reproduction. Their known history may be comparatively shallow, but they do have a hundred years of ancestral history behind them, during which they have rooted themselves in new land. And third, if the above argument is correct, then the timing of people’s conversion to Seventh-day Adventism is extremely surprising. In chapter 2 I mentioned that in 1992, or thereabouts, all ancestries of Sahameloka moved the bones of their ancestors to the village, and that each of them now has its own burial ground close by. This I interpreted

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<sup>15</sup> Feeley-Harnik discusses how Sakalava (a people in western Madagascar) royals create and employ history in order to legitimise their authority how, at the same time, commoners appropriate that history by participating in royal rituals (1978).

as the finalisation of the process of creating a new *tanindrazana* (land of the ancestors/home). Only a year or two thereafter, in 1993, the first people joined the Adventist church and many soon followed. It seems unlikely to me that *if* the Adventist church was perceived to somehow offer a substitute for the shallowness of people's own ancestral history, that they would have joined the church immediately after the finalisation of the creation of a new *tanindrazana*. And as I discussed in chapter 6, the requirement to stop practising exhumation and sacrifice is not an *attraction* of the Adventist church, but in the first instance a problem.

However, I cannot offer an explanation as to why Adventism has attracted so many people *recently* which might be the most interesting question to some students of religious 'fundamentalism'. As I noted earlier, explaining the recent growth of 'fundamentalist' movements is the main concern of the majority of analyses of such movements, though it has also been suggested that what has mainly grown is the scholarly interest in them (Caplan 1987a: 2, Bruce 1992: 45). But in the district of Maroantsetra, it is indeed a fact that Seventh-day Adventism has only become a phenomenon one can no longer ignore in the course of the past decade. I can, however, offer two observations. First, since the first people from Sahameloka converted to Seventh-day Adventism around 1993, there has been a process of chain conversion within particular ancestries. And with regard to relations among kin, it seems to have become easier to join the church, since in the past years, both sides have found ways of dealing with the situation. Such a process of chain conversion is also visible in Maroantsetra town. Second, the congregation in Maroantsetra town has recently embarked on a very intensive missionising program thus spreading their message to many villages in the countryside. These are observations, not explanations of the recent growth of Seventh-day Adventism. My only excuse is that this question has not been the topic of this thesis.

To summarise my position on explanations of 'fundamentalist' movements which concentrate on socio-economic features of members, I would like to stress that I do not propose that such explanations are in any way wrong. But I think that they are extremely partial and utterly insufficient in making us understand what people such as the Seventh-day Adventists in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka *experience* as practising

Seventh-day Adventists, and that such explanations fail to grasp the meaning the practitioners find in their involvement.

One problem with the available work on 'religious fundamentalism' I see in the fact that the field is very strongly dominated by sociologists, political scientists, historians as well as theologians (see e.g. the contributors to the Fundamentalism Project volumes 1-5). Anthropologists, and of course this is their own fault, have had very little to say on the subject up to now. I do not say this in defense of my own discipline, but because I do not recognise the 'fundamentalists' I got to know so well in the literature about them. This is perhaps so because the majority of the relevant studies focus on *leaders* and *publicly* displayed data<sup>16</sup>, or rhetoric<sup>17</sup>. Thus anthropology, because of its method of long-term participant observation among ordinary members of society, could make an important contribution to the study of groups we normally think of as 'fundamentalist'. In other words, I am not criticising other disciplines for they have made their contributions; I am criticising anthropology for having as yet failed to make its own. What I have attempted to do in this thesis is to adopt a specifically anthropological perspective.

I have attempted to do justice to people such as Papan' i Lorica who stays up for three-and-a-half hours after everyone else has gone to sleep studying the Bible by candlelight. I have tried to do justice to his passion for Adventist practice and that of many others. I have attempted not to explain away people's enthusiasm and eagerness for the activity of Bible study as an epiphenomenon of some other, supposedly deeper motivation to engage in Adventist practice. When Hery stepped forward in church posing the question to the assembled congregation as to whether God had also created Darkness, and if not, where Darkness came from, it was precisely this question he was interested in, and not anything else. And why had he bothered reading the book of Genesis at home in the first place? How, if not by their genuine interest in, and enthusiasm for, the process of studying, can we explain the shine in Maman' i Claude's and Maman' i Beby's eyes when they receive a new edition of the Bible Study Guide?

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<sup>16</sup> See Ault 1987, Marty and Appleby 1991, 1992, 1993, Moore 1993, Mendelsohn 1993, Whitehouse 1995 (on a millenarian cult in Papua New Guinea), Percy 1996, Appleby 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Harding's excellent work on American Baptists unfortunately only deals with leaders' rhetoric and narrative power (1987, 1991, 1992, 1994, 2000).

How can we capture Papan' i Claude's concentration when he sits at home on a rainy afternoon trying to make the letters in front of him meaningful? Does the fact that Vangé's and Claude's families are of slave descent make us understand why they meet in their free time to discuss Biblical matters? Not only could I observe the enthusiasm with which members of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Maroantsetra and Sahameloka engage in Bible study and the joy they derive from being actively involved in Socratic discussion and a process of dis-covering the truth. But whenever I asked people what they liked about the Adventist church, their answers were pregnant with the word *mianatra*.

## Glossary

<i>andafy</i>	any country other than Madagascar
<i>fady</i>	taboo
<i>fahaizana</i> (see <i>mahay</i> )	know-how, capability; here also referred to as potency
<i>finoana</i> (see <i>mino</i> )	trust in, acceptance of, belief in; here contrasted to ‘belief’ in the modern Christian sense
<i>fomban-drazana</i>	ancestral/Malagasy ways of doing things; in Adventist discourse: ancestral rituals
<i>havana</i>	kin (both matrilineal and patrilineal)
<i>hita maso</i>	visible
<i>lôhôlo</i>	lay church leader
<i>mahay</i> (see <i>fahaizana</i> )	to know, to be capable, to be potent
<i>mazava</i>	clear, light; here also referred to as a noun meaning ‘clarity’, in particular clarity of mind
<i>mianatra</i>	to study, to learn
<i>mino</i> (see <i>finoana</i> )	to trust in, to accept, to believe in
<i>mpiara-mivavaka</i>	members of the same church; here used to refer to fellow Seventh-day Adventists
<i>moniteur</i>	a person leading a Sabbath School discussion
<i>ray aman-dreny</i>	literally ‘father and mother’; parent, elder, senior person
<i>tanindrazana</i>	land of the ancestors, home
<i>vazaha</i>	all non-Malagasy people, especially Europeans and Americans

### Examples of Teknonyms

<i>Papan' i Beby</i>	Beby's dad
<i>Maman' i Claude</i>	Claude's mum
<i>Maman-dRazaka</i>	Razaka's mum
<i>Dadin' i Miri</i>	Miri's grandmother

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