

All One Body? A Missiological Appreciation of the Struggles of an Ethnic Church in Indonesia

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The horror of the Rwanda experience, echoing that of other ancient Christian communities now extinct, impels the worldwide church to the realisation that spectacular early growth does not guarantee biblically transformed societies. A people-group genuinely revolutionised in the 1930s by revival may turn in the 1990s to genocide, still claiming that 80% of the population are Christians.¹ Christian mission is never a past completed action with permanent results for every age; after a mass movement has been evaluated in missiological journals and reported in popular Christian books it becomes necessary to ask the innocent novel-reader's question: Did they really live happily ever after? In the Indonesian idiom: After the rice-harvest we replant the field. We cannot leave it untended and hope to reap again next harvest-time.

Although the rumours of 'Revival in Indonesia' in the late 1960s are familiar,² few in the English speaking world know of the previous 'people-movements' in the former Netherlands East Indies between 1850-1942.³ A careful and empathetic study of these established ethnic churches fifty to one hundred years' later yields abundant evidence of what it means to be part of 'an homogenous

1 P. Johnstone, *Operation World* (Carlisle: OM, 1993), 472.

2 E.g. Kurt Koch, *The Revival in Indonesia* (West Germany: Evangelisation Publishers, n.d.). For reliable background: Frank Cooley, *Indonesia Church and Society* (New York: Friendship Press, 1968).

3 Cooley, *Indonesia*, is the only English language history. In Indonesian: Th. Müller-Kruger, *Sejarah Gereja di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Badan Penerbit Kristen, 1959).

Mission and Meaning
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Cotterell

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growth unit':⁴ a mono-ethnic church. It is possible to learn from them the positive lessons, as well as the pitfalls, of an people's mass movement to Christ. This should be a necessary preliminary exercise for those whose priority is to 'reach the unreached people-groups' or to 'adopt a people'⁵ in the last years of the twentieth century.

1. Scene 1: Jubilee

On 9 October, 1986, the leader of the Indonesian nation, President Suharto, arrived to grace a Jubilee Celebration with his presence. He is a Muslim, the nation as a whole is 87% Muslim, yet as he processed slowly from his helicopter to the open-air podium in Sipoholon, North Sumatra thousands of Christians stood to greet him. For the President of this 'Pancasila Democracy'⁶ the Batak Christian Church (HKBP)⁷ is a powerful body, worthy of honour, a community of 1.5 million people noted for their prowess as politicians, soldiers, lawyers and musicians. Even among a population of 196 million the HKBP community cannot be ignored for it is the largest Protestant Christian group in the whole of South East Asia. As a crowd of more than thirty thousand flocked in for the 125th Anniversary we could feel proud of being part of *HKBP na bolon i* – the great HKBP.

The warlike, independent and reputedly cannibal Bataks had maintained a high degree of isolation in the mountainous inland regions of North Sumatra for about three thousand years before the arrival of Christian missionaries in the mid-nineteenth century. Ethnically Bataks are a Proto-Malayan people who have developed variations of language and customs through geographical separation. There are in fact six different Batak groups: Angkola, Mandailing, Pakpak, Simalungun, Karo and Toba. These number about 5.2 million people of whom 2.5 million are Christian.

Bataks differ most obviously from the other Malay peoples of Sumatra and all their fellow Indonesians, in their *adat*. This comprehensive, highly complicated web of customs and kinship obligations governed and still governs all aspects of life from birth to

4 D. McGavran (ed.), *Church Growth and Christian Mission* (San Francisco: Harper & Row), ch. 5.

5 E.g. E.M. Jaffarian, 'World Evangelisation by AD 2000: Will We Make it?', *EMQ* 30/1 (1994), 18-26.

6 Pancasila: the five pillars of the Indonesian constitution. The first is 'Belief in one God'.

7 *Huria Kristen Batak Protestan*: the Batak Protestant Christian Church.

the ancestors beyond the grave.⁸ A Batak would be more insulted to be told they are 'without *adat*'⁹ than that they are 'un-Christian' or 'un-Muslim'; it packs the equivalent punch of a full sentence: 'you uncivilised, uncultured, lawless louts!'

Many Batak Christians refer in awe to the prophetic vision given to their 'Apostle' Ingwer Ludwig Nommensen in the 1880s. Looking down from the hills on a warring, violent, ungovernable people he wrote to his superiors in Barmen:

In spirit I see scattered everywhere Christian congregations, schools and churches, groups of Bataks old and young, making their way to these churches: on every side I hear the sound of church bells calling the believers to the house of God. I see everywhere cultivated fields and gardens, green pastures and forests, tidy villages and dwellings in which are found the properly dressed descendants of this people. Still more I see preachers and teachers, natives of Sumatra, standing on the platforms and behind the pulpits, pointing out the way of the Christian life to both. You will say that I am a dreamer, but I say, No! I am not dreaming. My faith visions all this; it shall come to pass for all kingdoms shall be his and every tongue shall confess that Christ is Lord.¹⁰

Nommensen's eventual successor as head of the Batak Church, Johannes Warneck, wrote of 'Living Christ and Dying Heathenism'. It was 1908 and a time of 'ingathering' when the people movement among the Bataks was in full flood.¹¹ His book became a standard text for missionaries working among animistic peoples for more than fifty years so that Christian missionaries grew to expect an easier and quicker 'harvest' from primal communities than from the adherents of the major religions.

By 1930 Hendrik Kraemer could say from his own observation: 'in the short span of sixty years a change has been wrought here which may be called truly amazing, considering the past history of the Batak people.' They had, he said, been transformed from 'a pagan people into a Christian people', a work which 'belongs to the finest

8 Cf. Achim Sibeth's appropriate subtitle for his book, *The Batak: Living with Ancestors* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1991).

9 *Toba Batak-halak na so maradat*.

10 c. 1880. Cf. J.H. Hemmers, 'Sketches from the Life of Nommensen', trans. R.L. Archer, *The Malaysia Message* (January 1938), 18, in P.B. Pedersen, *Batak Blood and Protestant Soul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 64.

11 Membership figures: 1881: 5,998; 1891: 21,779; 1901: 47,784; 1911: 103,528; 1921: 196,406; 1930: 2,92,754; 1941: 442,164. Cf. E. Nyhus, 'An Indonesian Church in the Midst of Social Change: The Batak Protestant Church 1945-1957' (Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1987), 25.

results of missionary activity in modern times'.¹² On this evidence then, the HKBP can well be taken as a paradigm of how community conversions can produce ethnic churches, powerful, expanding and influential Christian communities.

2. Scene 2: Schism

Another face of the Batak church became apparent to the world in 1992, six short years after the triumphant Jubilee. The opening ceremony of the 51st General Synod of the HKBP in Sipoholon was greeted in a speech by the regional military commander Major General Pramono, also a Javanese Muslim. Read by a Christian adjutant, the speech reflects the unique brand of tolerance and mutual respect which has been fostered so far in this multi-faith republic. But Pramono also rebuked the church on its own terms, saying that current situation reminded him of:

God's word in my religion which is, apparently in all essentials, the same as... Galatians 5:22-23 which says "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control"... If I am not mistaken in my understanding, we might present a question for each of us to answer: Are disputes, conflicts, confrontations and schisms a way of expressing in other ways the spirit, vitality and values of love? Are they fruits of the Spirit of holiness?

Yet once again I must say, and you surely agree with me, that disputes, conflicts, confrontations and divisions like that are NOT another form of love. Nor are they fruit of the Holy Spirit. But they are fruits of an unclean spirit, of human passion mirrored in an absence of patience, of generosity, of loyalty, of gentleness and of the inability to exercise self-control.¹³

Armed guards of police and soldiers were present, to keep around six hundred delegates under control yet the 'disputes, conflicts and confrontations' continued. The Chairman and head of the HKBP, Ephorus,¹⁴ Dr. S.A.E. Nababan, could neither maintain order in Synod nor attempt to reach a consensus. He was neither re-elected nor deposed. Subsequent lobbying and intervention by the government in the interests of law and order and at the request of Nababan's opponents, have resulted in a divided church. There are,

¹² H. Kraemer, *From Missionfield to Independent Church* (London: SCM, 1958), 49, 43.

¹³ Newspaper report: *Suara Pembangunan*, Jakarta, 10 October, 1992.

¹⁴ 'Ephorus' – roughly equivalent to bishop; it is a presbyterial-synodical system in theory, associated with the Lutheran World Fellowship and the World Council of Churches in which Dr Nababan has formerly had a prominent role.

in 1995, two claimants as Ephorus HKBP: Nababan and Simanjuntak, the latter approved by the government but not acknowledged by all members or by the Indonesian Communion of Churches (PGI).

In 1994 there were two reported deaths as supporters of the rival church leaders clashed. Church attendance has declined and disillusionment of spirit is almost palpable. Meanwhile the local and national press covers such events in detail, other ethnic groups are confirmed in their prejudice against Bataks, and all Indonesian Christians, 16 million people, are shamed.¹⁵ There are few in the 1990s who would be proud to say they were part of 'the great HKBP'.¹⁶

The constant flaring leadership conflicts so 'typical' of Batak church life did not begin with the election of Ephorus Nababan in 1987. There had been a similar upheaval in 1963-64 resulting in the formation of the GKPI: the Protestant Church of Indonesia. Yet, twenty-five years later and after changes of leadership, the Indonesian speaking GKPI remains overwhelmingly Toba Batak in membership and shows the same internal tensions and struggles among the leadership as are apparent in its parent HKBP. Ironically, the first leader of this new church-group, Bishop Dr. Andar Lumbantobing, had made a special study of Batak attitudes to leadership and authority in his doctoral studies in Germany from 1954-57.¹⁷ It is to be regretted that his dissertation was not published in Indonesia until 1992 when its relevance became obvious to all.

Theological differences are rarely the real causes of bitter conflict in Batak churches, though they may be a convenient outer wrapping for inner personality conflicts. In the 1960s the issue was the powerful domination of Dr. T.D. Pardede, a wealthy Batak industrialist and millionaire, whose attempts to run the HKBP Nommensen University as a profitable business rather than a service to the Christian community precipitated revolt. The HKBP finally excommunicated him in 1978 after he had dominated the central councils of the church for over twenty years. On that occasion at a thanksgiving service in the provincial capital, Governor Tambunan

15 E.g. *Tempo*, Jakarta: magazine reports, 1988-1994.

16 E.R. Drayton and S. Wilson (eds.), *Unreached Peoples: The Refugees Among Us* (Eastbourne: MARC, 1983), 266, implied by their statistics that there is no Christian witness among the Bataks at all, classifying 1.6 million of them as an 'unreached people group' – this is manifestly untrue.

17 A. Lumbantobing, 'Das Amt In Der Batak-Kirche' (dissertation, University Friedrich Wilhelm, Bonn, 1957). Indonesian version: *Makna Wibawa Jabatan Dalam Gereja Batak* (Jakarta: Badan Penerbit Kristen, 1992).

exhorted the congregation, 'Do not think that, because of this, Satan has left the HKBP!'

Like an everlasting candle blown out only to relight, to be blown and relit again the pattern recurs. It might appear that 'the strong self-assurance of the Bataks and... their quarrelsome nature' is ineradicable for, as in the 1930s they still 'possess the Christian awareness of life mainly in the form of criticism'.¹⁸ The average Indonesian Christian has come to the conclusion, 'That's just how Bataks are,' or, more charitably, 'What can you expect? They were cannibals just a hundred years ago. Remember their pagan past.'

3. The Enduring Adat

At an elders' sermon preparation session in Medan in 1980 we discussed the set text, 'let the dead bury their dead, but go you and preach the gospel.' A younger man exploded with exasperation, 'It's impossible! Jesus couldn't be a Batak!' A chorus of voices replied with conviction and certainty, 'But he has, Jesus has become Batak!'

These contrasting positions provide us with a key to the intransigent problems of this ethnic church: it is not 'the pagan past of this people',¹⁹ assumed to have disappeared when they were Christianised, it is the very nature of Batakness. In a mono-ethnic church the shared values and worldview of all the members is an assumed 'given'. It is true that church groups with mixed backgrounds and racial identities have problems too, in Indonesia as elsewhere. But the rooted, unchanging intransigence, the explosive nature of conflict in this and other mono-ethnic churches²⁰ can only be explained and understood in terms of the 'silent language' of shared worldview values unique to each people. There are, then, certain unexamined 'givens' of Batakness which are in need of a true inculturation: 'The penetration of the Gospel message into, and its integration with, the community's culture as a single system of belief, values and behaviour, making the gospel message generative and creative within the culture.'²¹ Happily there is no lack of evidence, past or present, of the living Christ at work in the Toba Batak people.

As a minority people the Batak preserve the *adat* as a way of asserting their unique values, virtues and customs and assuring

18 Kraemer, *From Missionfield*, 65.

19 Kraemer, *From Missionfield*, 51.

20 In 1992 leadership crises were noted in the GKPI, the Karo Batak GBKP; Sulawesi Tenggara Church (GKST) and others.

21 L. Luzbetak, *Church and Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), 82.

themselves of their worth as a people. Other ethnic groups, even neighbouring peoples in Indonesia, are called *halak sileban*: foreigners, who are not entitled to the same *adat* conventions, courtesies and privileges. The majority group and the most dynamic are the Toba who habitually say of themselves: 'we shoot straight', indicating, and glorying in, their conspicuous outspokenness and marked lack of inscrutability. The *adat* puts a high value on openness; whether the facts are negative or positive, whether the information is hurtful or encouraging, the Batak will 'shoot'. In East Asia this is a unique and unappreciated quality but it is one by which the Toba distinguish themselves even from their cousins of Angkola, Simalungun and Karo, let alone the surrounding Malay peoples. Toba Bataks are inclined to disregard the basic East Asian virtue of saving one's own and other people's faces. These are the people of the HKBP, and it is among them that the Christian faith has taken deepest root. Yet the *adat* is more deeply rooted still.

Although the Dutch had governed the Indies since 1605 they had not considered the infertile uplands of North Sumatra, west of Lake Toba's sacred and beautiful shores, to be worth the effort of conquest. The 'natives' were too violent and fiercely independent, so they had been left in their chosen isolation. Any missionary attempts in the Toba region were discouraged by the authorities. There had been a short survey by British Baptists, Burton and Ward, in 1824. In the family of the Batak *raja* who received them and heard their message the response of their ancestor was remembered and passed down: 'In my judgment our *adat* and our customs are very good. But if you, sirs, know a way to wealth and fame, show us!'²² Then after an interval of ten years, two American Baptist missionaries, Munson and Lyman, venturing into the heartland, were killed. It is claimed they were ritually eaten.²³ After that the Bataks were left in peace for a space. The missionary survey of 1824 had not been very encouraging anyway: as they reported to Sir Stamford Raffles, the missionaries felt that the Batak:

bear in their character the features of imbecility, cowardice and cruelty; nor since they are already in a state of complete mental subjugation, should it be thought difficult to introduce the basis of a different order of things. As the tendency of the present system, however, is directly opposed to the internal advancement of society... it is probable they will

22 J.T. Nommensen, *Ompui Ephorus Dr. I.L. Nommensen* (Firma Pada: Medan), 90.

23 Pedersen, *Batak Blood* (as above, n. 10) – the only comprehensive introduction in English.

remain fixed in their present condition of stationary barbarity, until some external influence breaks in and diverts their native resources to other purposes.²⁴

The Angkola Bataks in the south of Tapanuli in the Sipirok valley became strongly influenced towards Islam during the Padri Wars from 1825 to 1829; then, following the suppression of the Imam Bonjol and his nationalist-Muslim movement, the Dutch government took control of the area. In 1857 four Dutch self-supporting missionaries obtained employment in the plantations and road-building projects of the colonial government. Through them two young men believed and were baptised on 31 March, 1861, the birthday of the church.²⁵ One of the two, Jakobus Tampubolon, was a Toba Batak. It was this majority group further north, largely untouched by Islam and still outside Dutch jurisdiction, that became the focus of evangelism for their 'Apostle'.

I.L. Nommensen (1834-1918)²⁶ insisted on braving violent reaction and the entrenched power of the *adat* against wise advice from the Dutch. As with so many of the 'pietist' missionaries of the nineteenth century, he was of minimal formal education and of ordinary working class parentage. He was inadequately equipped with the missiological and ecclesiological theories that were the background of his successor Johannes Warneck, son of the first Protestant academic missiologist Gustav Warneck. Yet, in so many ways, Nommensen laid the foundations for a truly inculturated church with a truly contextualised message, for he was noted for his love of the Batak people and, as we have seen, he had a vision.²⁷

The growth of the church was slow at first. The threat to the *adat* as the cement of society, the values holding the world in order and place provoked violence arising out of fear. Nommensen, with splendid chutzpah, attended a feast of thousands where he was to be the sacrifice appeasing the ancestral spirit. He argued with the spirit-medium, and was saved by a torrential rainstorm which both he and they regarded as 'sent from above'! Of the first thirteen people he

24 Burton and Ward, 'Report of a Journey into the Batak Country', *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 1 (1827), 513.

25 HKBP commonly uses 7 October, 1861: the date when two Dutch and two German missionaries of the Rhenish Mission (RMG) agreed to work together to reach Bataks; see Pedersen, *Batak Blood*, 54-56.

26 Pedersen, *Batak Blood*, 56-72; J.T. Nommensen, *Ompui Dr Ingwer Ludwig Nommensen* (Indonesian edn: Jakarta: Badan Penerbit Kristen, 1974).

27 A.A. Sitompul (ed.), *Sitastas Nambur Di Tano Batak* (P. Siantar: HKBP, 1986), 153-162; A.A. Sitompul (ed.), *Perintis Kekeristenan di Sumatra Bagian Utara* (Jakarta: Badan Penerbit Kristen, 1986), 211-41.

baptised one had been a shaman, another a spirit-medium.²⁸ These and others stood resolutely against compromise, refusing to call on the ancestors or to conform to their requests transmitted through persons who were spirit-possessed. They made a clean break from the first.²⁹

Early believers were expelled from their villages and were received by Nommensen in 'Peace Village' Huta Dame. It was a collection of wooden houses on stilts surrounded by a clay bank topped with a thicket of thorny bamboo, fortified as every other village around. Nommensen as founder was regarded as a *raja* and so he began to approximate to a status which was containable within the *adat*, and which helped him to speak with authority to the other village heads. The simplicity of his lifestyle and his closeness to the villagers gave him a life-long rapport with all classes of Batak people.

As village heads, when the *rajas* believed their whole family and community would follow suit making it unnecessary for new Christians to distance themselves from their communities. Fortunately Huta Dame was the only artificial Christian village to be created. Raja Pontas Lumbantobing³⁰ is the most famous of these early community leaders, a man respected outside his immediate clan even to the shores of Lake Toba where the highest of the kings, the priest-king Sisingamangaraja lived. It was Pontas' grandfather who had rejected Burton and Ward's preaching of the gospel in 1824 saying, 'In my judgment our *adat* and our customs are very good.' However, the need to repel attacks by the Islamic forces from the south during the Padri wars had unsettled the region in the intervening years making some more receptive to the new. For Pontas the Christian gospel, the educational opportunities that the missionaries brought and the obvious benefits of development for his people were all rolled together in the urge for *hamajuon*: dynamic progress. No more accusations of 'stationary barbarity' for him!

From 1865 and the baptism of the first believers native to the Silindung valley, the distinctive drive of the Toba Batak personality comes into the picture. Given opportunities there is nowhere they will not go and nothing they will not dare to do. The oppressive fears of the spirits, the continual warfare and disease were on the way out. As Jesus had promised, Bataks were free indeed! Mission

²⁸ Nommensen, *Dr. I.L. Nommensen*, 74.

²⁹ Sitompul (ed.), *Sitastas Nambur*, 45-46; Nommensen, *Dr. I.L. Nommensen*, ch. 11.

³⁰ Baptised 1867, Nommensen, *Dr. I.L. Nommensen*, 90; Sitompul (ed.), *Sitastas Nambur*, ch. 9.

schools where the gospel and life-skills were combined became the foundation of this new society for which Nommensen dreamed and worked. With the other missionaries of the Reinische Mission he established schools from the first, then seminaries for the training of teachers in 1868 and 1877. There was a short-lived awkward experiment with a separate school for the sons of *rajas*, preparing them for inevitable leadership but, significantly, the teachers found their students very difficult.³¹ 'Preachers and teachers' were there standing on platforms and behind pulpits within twenty-five years of the first acceptance of the gospel by a Batak. Some successful schoolteachers were selected to be trained for the ministry, and the first Batak ministers were ordained in 1885. The missionaries retained control over the 'districts' and of the synod yet national pastors were immediately involved in administering parishes and were empowered to administer both sacraments. This was in marked distinction from the ten year probation imposed by the missionaries of the Dutch Reformed Indische Kerk on national pastors working elsewhere in Indonesia.³²

As an essential tool for the inculturation of the gospel the translation of Scripture into the language and idioms of the nationals is a first priority. Nommensen completed his translation of the New Testament in both Batak and Latin orthography in 1878. The Old Testament was completed by Johansen in 1894. God began to be heard speaking in the Batak language into the *adat* situation. Here again the church in Batakland was far ahead of the rest of Indonesia where missionaries neglected to translate the Scriptures into local languages or the trade Malay for many years after the first baptisms.³³ The tools for the incarnation of the gospel into the culture were all at hand.

The movement gathered momentum in the last years of the nineteenth century. A group of national Christians including Laban Siahaan and Henoch Tobing founded the indigenous Batak Mission in 1899.³⁴ Headed by Tobing, then a young and well-connected newly ordained pastor, they aimed to reach their own people and then beyond to related neighbouring groups, the Simalungun and

31 J. Sihombing, *Tuan Markus* (P. Siantar: HKBP, 1960), 9-10; J.S. Aritonang, *Sejarah Pendidikan Kristen Di Tanah Batak* (Jakarta: Badan Penerbit Kristen, 1988), 217.

32 Müller-Kruger, *Sejarah*, 46-82.

33 No attempt was made for 127 years after Dutch entrance to the Indies.

34 Pedersen, *Batak Blood*, 73ff.; J.R. Hutaauruk, 'Die Batak-Kirche vor Ihrer Unabhängigkeit (1899-1942)' (dissertation University of Hamburg, 1980), ch. 3. Indonesian version: *Kemandirian Gereja* (Jakarta: Badan Penerbit Kristen, 1992).

Pakpak. This is the oldest indigenous cross-cultural mission in Indonesia; indeed it is still rare for Indonesian Christians even to contemplate participation in outreach across ethnic boundaries.³⁵ It had often been too hazardous to travel past one's neighbouring village in past years.³⁶

When Nommensen died in 1918 there were upwards of 150,000³⁷ baptised believers behind him, with their own ordained ministers, their schools and an increasingly orderly and peaceful society. Today his name is little known in the English speaking world, but in Batak society he gained the supreme title of great respect and love: *Ompu i Dr. Nommensen*, 'The Grandfather Dr. Nommensen'. The foundation had been laid by a man who was out for action, who led the church from the furthest frontier post and left his assistants behind in settled territory to deal with the day to day dull administration.

Nommensen could live with ambiguities. He could cope with strong-minded individuals and work within the *adat* system.³⁸ Until their actual power decreased to a mere formality under the Dutch the missionaries gave the *rajas* a place alongside the church elders in congregational counsels. As leaders of the society, in good German Lutheran tradition, they were respected and their advice considered. There is evidence, however, that the RMG missionaries, as good pietists, worried about the validity and reality of the faith of this first generation of Christians.³⁹ Hester Needham writes in 1890:

The one thing needful, the Holy Spirit seems always absent... it is as if everything is being done for the Battas (*sic.*) without the Holy Spirit: but how can we dare to call anything Christianity as long as the Spirit of Christ is absent. Many missionaries themselves are painfully aware of this, Mr Johansen specially so, and very many tears have they shed and prayers offered. It may be, however, that the blessed Spirit is working imperceptibly like the growth underground, and our successors will see

35 Outreach from Ambon and Jawa in the nineteenth century was inspired and organised by the missionaries (cf. Müller-Kruger, *Sejarah*, 84ff., 160ff.). Until the 1980s only the Batak churches in Indonesia had cross-cultural mission their programmes. GKPI and HKBP evangelists still work in non-Batak groups elsewhere in Indonesia.

36 Laban Siahaan had been part of the Sisingamangaraja's force of fighting men dedicated to the resistance of western influence and the coming of the Dutch. He now became an evangelist and colporteur financed by the British Bible Society, travelling on foot throughout the region undeterred by an occasional meeting with the famous Sumatran tigers. See Sitompul (ed.), *Perintis Kekristenan*, 227-28.

37 Nyhus, 'Indonesian Church', 25.

38 Sitompul (ed.), *Perintis Kekristenan*, 219-41.

39 1893, already approximately 22,000 Christians.

what is hidden from our eyes. At any rate we can be thankful that so many are willing to come within the sound of the gospel, and to keep away for a little while from the spiritual filth of their villages.⁴⁰

In the understanding and idiom of the early twentieth century, repugnant to us today, Johannes Warneck (1867-1944) attributed at least part of missionary success among animistic peoples to: 'the superiority of the white race that brings them the gospel' because the Europeans were, in his terms, 'Christian nations'. 'In Sumatra, as well as in the whole of the Netherland India (*sic.*), not only the missionaries, but the oppressed population desire to come under the Colonial Government.'⁴¹

Warneck's father 'the founder of the Protestant science of missions' had produced the three volumed, *Missionslehre*, which became the key textbook in Germany up to 1939. Gustav Warneck (1835-1910) thought in terms of the creation of 'folk-churches'⁴² rather than one-by-one evangelism of the standard pietist approach. Andar Lumbantobing explains: 'according to this way of thinking the work should begin with the family, the unit from which society is made; from there a line of communication could be drawn to relatives, clans and then the whole people.'⁴³

Johanes Warneck, in the folk memory, is known today as one who 'loved Bataks, but as a father to his small children'.⁴⁴ When he became Ephorus he saw his task as that of consolidation, rationalisation and proper administration: inward-looking. The Batak Mission's status was no longer to be that of a para-church indigenous movement receiving overwhelming support from the members of the HKBP, it became an body within the church structure, organised and controlled by the missionaries.⁴⁵

The years ahead were to be full of stress as Bataks demanded a greater part in the running of their church. The tone of letters from missionaries published in the HKBP Immanuel magazine between

40 An independent self-financed English missionary living in Pansurnapitu with Nommensen's friends the Johansen family, saw the early flood of converts. At Easter 1890, about ninety adults were baptised, and more were due in a fortnight, from that small village alone. Cf. H. Needham, *God First* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1899), 50-51.

41 J. Warneck, *Living Christ and Dying Heathenism* (orig. pub. 1909; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1954), 165-66.

42 J. Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 27ff.

43 Lumbantobing, *Makna Wibawa*, 107 (105-113).

44 Dr. Hutauruk, historian of Batak Church, P Siantar, c. 1989. Personal comment to author.

45 Pedersen, *Batak Blood*, 74ff.; Hutauruk, *Kemandirian Gereja*, ch. 3.

1917-1940 is condescending, hectoring and authoritarian.⁴⁶ Not even the most dogmatic Batak leader would adopt such approaches today. Only the internment of the German missionaries by the Dutch powers in 1940 was to release the church from what had become the strangling rigor mortis grip of missionary domination.⁴⁷ In 1930 Kraemer had commented: 'These Bataks are right in thinking that in their hearts the missionaries have but a condescending smile for their progress... missions were too exclusively possessed of the desire to raise a strong Christian community and a strong church and did not sufficiently desire to build up a strong Christian people.'⁴⁸

The RMG missionaries from 1920 to 1940 enacted a pattern of Christian leadership to which power-struggles were an inevitable response. Some of them were noticeably self-sacrificing, hard-working and devoted to the good of the Batak people: Oskar Marcks for example.⁴⁹ But even he, acclaimed as an exemplary leader and teacher, admitted that Bataks were a 'psychological riddle' to him. Many a missionary asked why the relationship between dogmatics and ethics was still so tenuous, why Bataks found it so difficult to live in unity and peace.

4. Return to the Adat

None of the second generation of missionaries experienced the closeness of living with Bataks in the villages that was the lot of the pioneers. Those men had come out as bachelors and often spent years waiting for their chosen brides to be sent to join them. They saw how the *adat* worked and, to their credit, worked with the nationals to incorporate Christian elements into the rites and ceremonies of the community. As one attends a wake in Batakland today there will be a constant coming and going of friends to see the body lying in state and to sing hymns and pray together. There may also be those who will make their farewell speeches to the deceased and mourn their passing with the distinctive *andung-andung* laments sung spontaneously in the old ways.

A great church structure had been created, well administered in all the key positions by Europeans. Few, if any, of these saw that the *adat* was a deeper matter than quaint outward ceremonies. Today it

46 Hutaaruk, *Kemandirian Gereja*, 94ff. A missionary's letter using the pseudonym: 'a lover of the Batak people.'

47 Hutaaruk, *Kemandirian Gereja*.

48 Kraemer, *From Missionfield*, 69.

49 Kraemer, *From Missionfield*, 51; Sihombing, *Tuan Markus*.

is possible to be adopted into a Batak clan and to feel, if only dimly, the inward force of the *adat* and its key values. The policies and conditions of missionary life in the early twentieth century made such empathy extremely unlikely. By keeping leadership in their own hands, particularly in the case of the Batak Mission, the missionaries deprived the church of their most important responsibility: to work toward the inward conforming of the Batak worldview to the values and principles of New Testament Christianity.

5. The Keys: (1) Kinship-Obligations

Adat may be described in terms of its rites of passage, its ceremonies and customs, or in terms of its basic beliefs and values. On the deepest and most enduring level, however, it is a matter of kinship. Outwardly this may seem to be just an interesting anthropological feature: a patrilineal society, a matter of clans, their septs and their enemies. Villages were founded by members of one clan or *marga*, and so people of that name continue to regard that place as their ancestral home just as with the ancient Scots and Irish clan system. What may appear to be 'regional loyalty' is therefore kinship loyalty, and even more powerfully, inescapable, unquestioned kinship obligation.⁵⁰

Bataks explain these, the deepest loyalties of *adat*, as *Dalihan Na Tolu*, loosely interpreted as 'threefold foundation'. The analogy is of traditional village cooks who built a wood fire between three flat stones on which the cooking pot would rest. The stability of a three-legged stool or a tripod camera stand is often used as a modern equivalent image. Every Batak has a threefold relationship that gives stability and status in life: firstly with blood brothers and sisters the *kahaanggi*, then with the wife-takers receiving women from the clan *anak-boru*, and thirdly with the wife-givers to the clan the *hula-hula*. If the clan is Hasibuan, for example, any other clan which receives a Hasibuan wife will be under obligation to revere and respect any other Hasibuan person wherever they meet, however distantly related. They are one's *raja* or *hula-hula*.

⁵⁰ Sibeth, *Batak*, ch. 3; L. Schreiner, *Adat unbd Evangelium* (Wuppertal). Indonesian version: *Telah Kudengar Dari Ayahku* (Jakarta: Badan Penerbit Kristen, 1978).

Further complications arise through the fraternal relationships between certain clans going back 12-17 generations.⁵¹ The preferred exogamous matrimonial relationship to one's maternal cousin, or to one of her clan, just adds to the complication from an outsider's viewpoint. This explains why every new acquaintance begins by asking 'invasive' questions about ones ancestry! Bus journeys are thus considerably enlivened as people *martarombo* – rehearse their genealogies and search for the appropriate relationship-term to use. A triumphant and satisfactory conclusion between two men might be heralded with: 'So, you must call me *tulang*.' This moves the relationship one step on from the opening courtesy of calling each other *lai* – brother-in-law – to the closer relationship of a maternal uncle to a nephew. Like all relationships this means obligation: the maternal uncle is *hula-hula* and must be respected, the nephew is a prospective son-in-law and therefore worth investigating. For the interested outsider it takes a while to perceive, and then to empathise with, this elaborate process of 'greeting' whereby an assumed general kinship relationship (*lai*) is moved on to a true close-kin relationship (*tulang*) involving obligation.

When one realises that the *hula-hula* have such traditional power over those who have received wives from them that they are described as *debata na niida*: visible gods, many things become clear. Elaborate and complicated kinship terms are one thing but the hidden obligations to serve one clan and to be served by others lies behind most of the conflicts the Batak church has experienced. The written histories of the HKBP do not record the clan names of the wives, though the older people will remember these orally at least three generations back. These kinship-obligations were probably crucial in determining the reasons for alliances and for enmities. There may be real theological, administrative or personal reasons for conflict but the alliances that follow are largely *adat*-determined to this day. Without an understanding of this underlying web of inescapable obligations and relationships the non-Batak observer may conclude that these people are lovers of conflict, of law-suits and of violence for its own sake: 'Among the peoples of the Netherlands East Indies the Bataks are a special people. They are a difficult, self-asserting and stubborn people, coarse and lacking refinement of being and culture.'⁵²

51 E.g. the Hasibuan are regarded as close kin to all Tobing, Hutabarat, Hutagalung or Panggabean people whose traditional villages cluster round Tarutung in the Silindung valley.

52 Kraemer, *From Missionfield*, 44.

Young people often complain about the kinship obligations of *adat* but it is a hidden safety-net of mutual obligation which gives life in a Batak church great warmth. Wherever one goes, however remote from North Sumatra, if a Batak is there, a way of claiming relationship and some sense of mutual obligation will follow. If he is a pickpocket in far-off Jakarta he will not rob you, at least not after he has heard you protest in loud ringing Batak tones! If she is a village woman in the high plateau you are obliged to give her the garment she requests as she is obliged to feed you. Sometimes it is difficult to say if the warmth of *koinonia* in a Batak Christian community is motivated by *adat* or *injil*, by custom or the gospel. Sometimes one would even dare to say that the penetration of the gospel has Christianised the *adat* and that the pioneer missionaries from 1861 to 1918, naively pietist though they may have been, achieved a very great deal.

6. The Keys: (2) Office-Bearing

It is with this background of *adat* assumptions and concepts that leadership problems come into focus. The qualifications for leadership in any Batak-centred body will have something to do with kinship, home-village and ancestry. The crucial factor, his *hula-hula*, will mean that in this chauvinist-male society, this supremely macho group of men, the wife's family background will be the deciding factor.

Nepotism is engrained in the system too, regarded as a positive: any Batak is obligated to advance their kin. Since successive Angkola Bataks have held power in the Governor's department of North Sumatra in the late 1980s many members of their three main clans: Nasution, Lubis and Siregar have been promoted and their villages seven hours' journey away prospered. In understanding mockery North Sumatrans describe the regime with acronyms: NASI - 'rice', and LUNASI - 'pay-up!' Resentment is tempered with the knowledge that 'in their position we would do the same, in fact we would be obligated to do so'!

Communities in East Asia are all family-centred not individualistic or democratic in western terms. Yet appointment to leadership in church or state involves commitment to, and promises of, disinterested fair dealing. Seen at first hand in North Sumatra this has not yet been feasible. In recent years there have been a handful of persons appointed to responsible posts in local government and the church who have attempted to be even-handed and have ignored their kin-responsibilities. They have not been reappointed, some

have even been deposed. Society pressure builds up against the one who says 'once I walk into my workplace the *adat* does not apply' and the viciousness of the backlash can become intolerable.

Leadership style will also flow naturally from those *adat* relationships and assumptions. Outspokenness, vigorous no-holds-barred debate and unbridled arrogance will have their place; yet to one's kin-by-marriage, the *hula-hula*, great respect and courtesy is due. How, then, can a spiritual leader exercise discipline in the congregation? How can he or she⁵³ preach on those awkward passages that are all too appropriate rebuke to erring kin? Well might a Batak Pastor remember Luther's words: 'we preachers are a highway over which the Devil rides.'

Andar Lumbantobing's outstanding analysis of the Batak concepts of authority and their application to church leadership shines more light on the central issues of Batakness.⁵⁴ In pre-Christian times the hereditary leadership of clan and village headship, the *raja*, was supplemented by acknowledged 'charismatic' leaders: the *datu-imam*, a shaman-priest-healer figure, the *ulu-balang*, champion in war, and the *sibaso*, who were usually female spirit-mediums through whom the ancestors continued to participate in the life of their descendants. Christianisation from 1861 and Dutch colonial interference with indigenous patterns of leadership after 1878 led to a weakening and erosion of the traditional authority of the *rajas*. After roads were built into Batakland from 1910 the dispersion of the people in search of material prosperity and advancement: *hamajuon*, led them to every corner of the archipelago and exposed Bataks to other patterns of society. Christian teaching forbade the operations of shaman, clairvoyant and spirit-medium. New kinds of leaders emerged. Yet, though qualifications for leadership changed, the inherently Batak values and beliefs about the function, status, and authority of leaders remained as the unexamined, assumed 'givens' of life in continuity with ancestral patterns.

Lumbantobing points to two concepts connected with office-bearing: *tohonan* and *sahala* which have affected the Batak church and which need to be recognised and reassessed in the light of New Testament teaching. J. Warneck had interpreted *sahala* as authority, wealth, fame and power; Tobing regards the term as more analogous to *mana*, as understood in Polynesian and Melanesian societies. *Sahala* includes authority, wealth in possessions and numbers of

53 1986 – the first woman ordained to the ministry in HKBP: Rev. Noortje P. Lumbantoruan. Quite a revolution in a patriarchal *adat* system.

54 Lumbantobing, *Makna Wibawa*, 34ff.

children, bravery and strength, intelligence and shrewdness, oratory, a sense of justice, spiritual and occult powers, wide knowledge and so on. People are acknowledged as possessing *sahala* if they succeed in establishing a new village, are successful gamblers, win battles or win unlikely legal cases through debating gifts.⁵⁵

It may be seen that *sahala* has little relation to morality as biblical Christianity would understand it. A very wealthy individual is almost certainly involved in corruption in a developing country like Indonesia but they will be respected and followed by many people because he or she is thought to have *sahala* and may, perhaps, pass it on to others. The non-Batak assumes that the 'hanger-on' is just after the rich person's money, but it is a more complex relationship than that.

The wife-providing *hula-hula* are the prime conveyors of *sahala* who must therefore be treated with great care and respect: without their *sahala*, couples will remain childless, the disapproval of in-laws may be the prime cause of infertility. Even the boundless hospitality and continual flux of guests in any moderately comfortable home is linked to the belief that the reception of many guests conveys and confirms their *sahala*, in addition to the fulfilment of mutual family obligations.⁵⁶

A person's *tohonan* is their office, position or role within the church. 'Before the coming of Christianity the term was used for the office of a clan chieftain, however in practise nowadays it is used exclusively for church leadership roles.'⁵⁷ Non-ecclesiastical occupations are referred to as 'work' or 'jobs' while positions of church leadership in individual congregations or in Synod are for those who have been formally received in some kind of 'ordination' ceremony. This *tohonan* qualifies a person to be part of the *parhalado* – the kirk session or management committee and has acquired 'a magical connotation'.⁵⁸ Elders, congregational leaders, evangelists, Bible-women, Deaconesses and Pastors all have the *tohonan* which has usually been regarded as a life-long status and a spiritual empowerment. The English term 'office-bearer' conveys a flavour of such a semi-mystical view of the position and powers of leaders: one way to achieve *sahala* is to become a full-time Christian worker.

55 Lumbantobing, *Makna Wibawa*, 22.

56 Lumbantobing, *Makna Wibawa*, 29-30.

57 Lumbantobing, *Makna Wibawa*, 263.

58 Lumbantobing, *Makna Wibawa*, 263.

7. A Lesson for Mission: The Resilience of a Worldview

The components of a Batak view of life and leadership come together, then, in these three elements: kinship and obligation; the endowment of blessing, *sahala*, and office-bearing responsibility, *tohonan*. These are the complex intertwined beliefs that make it difficult for 'Jesus to be a Batak' for they are unexamined, assumed values automatically operative in Batak society and in a church which has been from the beginning a mono-ethnic entity.

One of the functions of a missionary or fraternal church worker from another race or people is to bring to their notice the worldview assumptions held all unconsciously in the host society. These need to be held up to the light of biblical values and principles so that the local people may themselves recontextualise⁵⁹ the gospel and inculturise the Christian faith. In a special way an ethnic church needs to hear Jesus' rhetorical question, 'Who are my mother, my sisters, my brother?' and open itself to the radical renewal of his answer, 'those who do the will of God, those are my mother, my sister, my brother' (Mark 3:31-34).

Sixty years after Kraemer's visit, 134 years after the first baptisms, it is still true to say: 'In principle Christianity appears to have gained the victory, but not yet in practice.'⁶⁰ This lost opportunity, this 'false witness' of Christians, has occurred at a time of unprecedented influence by conservative Muslims in Suharto's Cabinet leading some to discern that a creeping 'Islamisation' is now under way. In such a crisis the Christian community among the Batak people needs to reassess its history and listen to the pleading voices of their fellow-Indonesians, their kin in Christ. Acknowledging the personal, cultural and political influences that have led to this tragic negation of the gospel they may then embark on radical repentance, renewal and change.

With God, nothing is impossible!

⁵⁹ B. Nicholls, in J. Douglas (ed.), *Let The Earth Hear His Voice* (Minneapolis: Worldwide Publications, 1975), 647.

⁶⁰ Kraemer, *From Missionfield*, 50. The same might have been said of late Victorian Britain, after 1,500 years of Christianisation.