

**A CATHOLIC MISSION
AND THE PURIFICATION OF CULTURE:
EXPERIENCES IN AN INDONESIAN COMMUNITY**

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Introduction

A PERENNIAL concern of Christian missionaries, as well as of anthropologists, is the extent to which the tenets of a proselytizing religion are compatible with the cultural practices of a people undergoing conversion (and, conversely, the extent to which these practices are acceptable to holders of the new faith). This quandary has caused much discussion, especially recently, in the Catholic communities of eastern Indonesia.

In June 1987, after a five-year absence from the village of Lamalera, Lembata, in the province of Nusa Tenggara Timur, Indonesia, I returned with a four-man British film crew to make a television documentary about the villagers' contemporary way of life (Blake 1988). Much of the film's interest focused on their fishing economy, which includes the hunting of large manta ray, as well as porpoise and whales. However, making a record of subsistence activities was not the only object. We were keen to cover religion, education, modern economic activities and participation in national political life.

In all of these aims we were reasonably successful, partly due to the fortunate fact that the brief four weeks we were there were extraordinarily eventful. An example of this is that during our visit the youngest son of the former district leader (*kakang*), Ignasius Ile Mandiri Dasion, was ordained a Catholic priest in the local church in a ceremony that brought dignitaries and descendants of the village from far and wide.

Lamalera and Catholicism

Lamalera is an entirely Catholic village, and has been so since the 1920s. The village was, however, first visited by two Dutch Catholic missionaries, J. de Vries and Cornelius ten Brinck, in June 1886 (Heslinga 1891: 68-9). In 1986, the year before my latest trip, the village was host to an even larger contingent of visitors as it celebrated 'One Hundred Years of Religion'. De Vries and ten Brinck were Jesuits, members of an order that had been working in the Flores area since 1863, following the transfer of the territory from Portugal to the Dutch East Indies in 1859. The Jesuits remained in the area only until 1920, when they gave it over to the Societas Verbi Divini (or SVD). The first SVD missionaries, Petrus Noyen and Konstantin van den Hemel, opened a station on Flores in 1915 (Piskaty 1963: 10-21). Although missionaries visited Lamalera periodically after 1886, the first permanent missionary stationed there was the German Bernhard Bode in 1920 (Bode 1925).¹

In an interview filmed for the documentary, the resident Catholic missionary, Father Arnold Dupont, spoke of the likelihood that foreign missionaries would soon be needed less. Indonesian priests, being of the same nationality as the villagers, could, he thought, be expected to be more effective as religious leaders. In the course of the interview Dupont spoke of the interest that Indonesian priests took in 'inculturation'.

My absence of five years between 1982 and 1987 corresponded to a period of growing interest in, if not the actual introduction of, the concept of inculturation, which Shorter (1988: 5) insists is a theological rather than an anthropological concept.² What may have been the first seminar on inculturation in Indonesia took place in Yogyakarta, Java, in 1983 (*ibid.*: 10). Meanwhile, it has taken hold within the church in the Flores area. Seminary students have been assigned the task of writing about the concept from the perspective of their own local cultures, and the English SVD priest, John Mansford Prior, has undertaken a study of customary marriage among the Ata Lio of central Flores as an empirical investigation of the problems of inculturation (Prior 1988). Furthermore, the

1. For a summary of the main events, see Barnes 1986. For a discussion of the mission in the colonial context, see Dietrich 1989 and above.

2. The quasi-anthropological concept of 'inculturation' gained popularity in the 1970s, mostly through the writings of Jesuit authors (Schreiter 1985: 2; Luzbetak 1989: 69; Shorter 1988: xi, 10; see also Pickering and Burke above). Shorter (1988: 10) says that the term was first used by Joseph Masson, a professor at the Gregorian University in Rome, in 1962; but according to Luzbetak (1989: 405) it was already in use in the 1930s. Catholic theologians distinguish the word from the anthropological terms 'acculturation', the adaptation of one culture to another, and 'enculturation', the way in which a person learns his own culture. Schreiter (1985: 5) comments that while 'inculturation' is widely accepted in church circles, 'it causes some difficulties in dialogue with social scientists in that it seems to be a dilettantish kind of neologism on the part of non-scientists'. I am grateful to Sister Joan Burke for helping me find my way into the literature on this topic.

Centre for the Investigation of Religion and Culture Candraditya (Pusat Penelitian Agama dan Kebudayaan Candraditya) at Ledalero in Maumere, Flores, has announced a programme of research into local religious beliefs in order to establish the relationship between syncretism and inculturation (Puslit Candraditya 1989).

Luzbetak compares this new concept of inculturation with the accommodation of non-Christian cultural elements, which he holds to be a process as old as the Church itself:

Accommodation insists that, inasmuch as such non-Christian elements can and indeed do exist, the universal Church and the sending churches may, and indeed should, allow local churches to incorporate such elements as part and parcel of the local Christian community's behaviour. In fact, such 'neutral' and 'naturally good' elements may be employed as contact points with Christianity. They can form a useful and important bridge between Christianity and 'paganism'. (Luzbetak 1989: 67)

However, accommodation has largely been in the hands of cultural outsiders. Inculturation involves a process of 'contextualization', i.e. 'the various processes by which a local church integrates the Gospel message (the "text") with its local culture (the "context")' (ibid.: 69). For Shorter (1988: 4), inculturation is the interactions of 'faith' with culture. Luzbetak (1989: 78) divides culture into three levels, viz. form, integration and the dynamic systematic whole. There is no need to dwell on this schema in order to understand the implications of his assertion that inculturation must go beyond the first of these levels and focus on the second and third. Christianity, in this view, must take hold of whatever it is that integrates a culture and makes it what it is, its basic principles.

A seminar held at Ledalero in 1988 took the position that Christianization did not mean uprooting people from their own culture, obliging them to adopt European culture, and asked rhetorically whether a person must become 'Western' in order to become truly Christian (Anonymous 1988). This line was expressed forcefully by Hubert Muda, who argued that for too long missionary attitudes toward other religions were limited by Western conceptions of monotheism and that the process of decolonization coincides with the resurgence of traditional religions and cultures. According to Muda, since Vatican II inculturation requires a dialogue with local faiths (Muda 1988).

Subsequently, Mantovani wrote that 'the partner' in such a dialogue would be someone professing a traditional religion or a Christian whose culture remains that of the traditional religion. There would be no dialogue if one partner was regarded as lower, childish and primitive. The good name of traditional religions has been damaged by the claim that they are 'primitive': 'the first step is to rehabilitate traditional religions, then to provide a theology of the traditional religions, and finally to renew religion from within' (Mantovani 1989: 30-32). He continues:

Universal religions, including Christianity, regard traditional religions as inferior. Missionary practice has been influenced by this attitude. We honour Hinduism,

Islam and so on, and we attempt a dialogue with them, but we regard traditional religions as 'being primitive', as religions therefore which may be gotten rid of. This attitude is based on ignorance. (Ibid.: 41)

According to Mantovani (ibid.: 29), before a dialogue can begin the missionaries must study the local symbol system and culture. The purpose is not merely to become as familiar as possible with customary law or to discover the cultural grammar that gives meaning to the variety of local custom. Instead, missionaries must understand the system itself. A case in point concerns the ancestors. Only the cultural system can reveal whether attitudes toward the ancestors are compatible with the convictions of Christianity.

In Prior's perspective, inculturation contrasts with those initiatives of the 1970s that attempted to 'deepen the faith' of 'simple people'. The problem had been interpreted then as one of ignorance and a lack of understanding, due both to a general lack of formal education among the peasant population and to a lack of sufficient numbers of clergy:

My move from coastal town to the mountainous interior [of central Flores, among the Ata Lio] in January 1981 brought me into direct daily contact with village life, with the peasant farmers' living traditions, beliefs and customs...here, in the village, although the people were by no means as active in formal Catholicism as were the Christians in town, faith was transparently open, utterly honest and deeply personal. All this contrasted with what was happening on another level: the village Florenese have been lapsing from active sacramental practice at a steadily increasing rate over the past 15 years. The Church as taught by the incoming Catholic institution, and the faith as believed by the populace seem to be steadily diverging on their own individual paths. (Prior 1988: 1-2)

With the lapsing rate continuing apace in the Ende Archdiocese, Prior speaks of a decoupling of village religion from institutional religion: 'Is the Florenese Church an example of an inculturated faith, or a case of a theologically indefensible syncretism?' (ibid.). As he acknowledges, neither question is neutral, and each speaks for the stance of the enquirer. Somewhat gloomily, Prior concludes that the Church in Flores only paid lip-service to Pius XII's exhortation in 1950 not to decree the suppression of native custom before proving that it is 'indissolubly linked with error, or immorality or absurd superstition' (ibid.: 54). Later, he writes:

Coming from the outside as an invading culture, the institutional Church speaks for a Beyond, that which is outside from the village, of a wider world, a broader canvas, a universal vision which is mediated to the local culture through ritual led by the incoming clerics. The incoming Church has not succeeded in establishing a 'Catholic culture', it has not been able to build up a 'pure Catholicism'; it has appropriated the village culture through a prolonged process of assimilation and has decided upon a geographically universal spread of the Church throughout the

island rather than concentrating upon the development of a 'deep' or intense form of the faith. (Ibid.: 181).

Of course, in making these remarks Prior reveals, as he acknowledges, his own position in a debate carried on within the Divine Word Mission.

This recent blossoming of interest in inculturation provides a context for understanding, at least, unverified rumours circulating in Lamalera in 1987 that Catholic priests from Lamalera wanted to restore the old culture, including the village ritual temple (*korke*). A plan under consideration by members of the three most prominent clans to retrieve the sacred stones (*nuba nara*) perhaps had more to do with the government's programme to encourage the refurbishment of traditional culture for purposes of attracting the tourist trade than to changes in theological fashion. That Catholic priests might seriously discuss such steps, however, appears not entirely out of the question, given calls for the Church to become open to other, including local, religions and an allegedly new recognition that salvation may be achieved outside the Church (Muda 1988: 25, 27). My source expressed both support for these moves and some anxiety about the possible outcome, as well as the conviction that no such step could be taken so long as a European missionary was resident in the village.

Since Bode established a permanent mission in Lamalera in 1920, there have been only four missionaries. The second of these was Bruno Pehl, who took over from Bode when he fell seriously ill in 1951 and served until 1962, when he was replaced for a time by Kurt Trummer (see Beding 1986a: 61). Pehl was a stern disciplinarian, who employed a rhetoric that had little in common with inculturation. For example, concerned about the problem of providing pastoral care to 6000 Catholics in twenty small villages, he wrote that the priest 'must bring it home to the Christians, to compel them and force them, to leave their small villages and come to the large ones with their churches and schools, even if they have with much effort and sacrifice built beautiful small chapels' (Pehl 1955: 132).

Speaking of the need to break up extended family dwellings and to impose the rule that every new family must provide itself with a separate house *before* the Catholic wedding may take place, Pehl wrote:

For years I have pointed out before every marriage in an almost unmerciful way to both young and old that they are already Catholics in Lamalera and that therefore they must follow the 'Catholic' marriage regulations. That means in practice one pushes the old-fashioned, heathen marriage arrangements somewhat into the background and in the best of circumstances completely forgets them! I maintain the principle that at every suitable or unsuitable opportunity I hammer into their heads: bridewealth affairs must be changed into an affair of an orderly house for the young couple who are to marry. To express it more primitively: provision of bridewealth means Heathen Marriage, provision of a house means Catholic Marriage! (Ibid.: 88)

Though the character of the rhetoric has changed, this principle has been maintained, and, as I have witnessed, at least occasionally it causes bitter anger among family members responsible for making the necessary arrangements. This is not the place to describe the sociology of marriage, a standard topic in the social anthropology of this region (see Prior 1988; Barnes 1977), but it may be noted that it is always a collective matter with serious obligations on, and implications for, a wide range of relatives. It is precisely these collective implications that Pehl was not willing to tolerate.

Seventy years of direct missionary supervision has brought substantial changes in marriage practice and customary law. Freedom to choose one's spouse is assured. There is also now a lack of uniformity in the degree to which people live up to the obligations to make marriage prestations, and some confusion about what those obligations are and how values are reckoned (at least in comparison with my experience in the neighbouring Kédang culture). Nevertheless, the form remains the same and marriage is still central to the collective life of the community.

The mission completed a church in Lamalera in the year that Bode established himself there.³ He also placed a small chapel in every quarter of the village (Windt 1936: 198) and set out to force the community to give up heathen ceremonies, at which, by his own account, he was soon successful (Bode 1925). However, success is also a matter of interpretation. Certain ceremonies having to do with good fortune in fishing have long been in abeyance, following the death or conversion of the native priests.⁴ Others, such as the ceremony at the beach to mark the opening of the fishing season, have been taken over overtly and reshaped by the missionary. At the centre of the stretch of beach where the boats are housed is a place where whale bones were stacked up. This place had ceremonial significance in the traditional religion, and it is there that Bode

3. The first building used for religious services was a bamboo construction in the lower village, which soon had to be dismantled. For a time thereafter, a storehouse, previously a Chinese store, was used. From 1915 until 1920 services were held in a school building in the upper village. In 1920 craftsmen from the mission station at Larantuka, Flores, erected a church with walls made of earth mixed with lime. In 1931 this building was struck by a typhoon, necessitating its demolition. In 1932 the villagers erected a more substantial structure, with cement walls and a tin roof, which was still in use when I first visited the village in 1971. In 1963 they commenced work on a much larger church, which was consecrated in 1975, the older church then being torn down (Beding 1986a: 42-3).

4. Worstbrock (1937: 27) records that when Bode began work, thirty 'sorcerers' wished to know nothing of Christianity. He then quotes Bode's rather gleeful comment that 'remarkably, almost all of them died within a very short time'. Three leading priests of the village religion, Krofe, Prason, and Haga, led a long resistance to conversion. Bode attributed this opposition not to firm and full conviction, but to their desire to be better off than others, for which they were prepared to resort to sly and coarse menaces: 'Being a *molan* [native priest] was a profitable berth'. However, by 1925, he had completed the conversion of the village, including two of his three opponents. Only one remained unprepared to become a Christian (Bode 1925: 116, 131).

established a chapel named for St Peter. The annual service to mark the opening of the fishing season still takes place there.

In recent years, Dupont has attempted to incorporate into the ceremony traditional costumes and ritual language. He has not, however, always been satisfied with the results or with the spirit in which the villagers have participated. Indeed, on occasion the villagers have felt that the Christianized version of the ceremony has not been successful in bringing luck for the fishing and have asked the lord of the land, whose prerogative in these matters the mission has supplanted, to quietly perform the rite again in a more effective form.

I have described elsewhere (Barnes 1986) how educational and religious opportunities made available by the mission gave the villagers of Lamalera a head start over people from other villages in moving into modern occupations and the professions, including higher education and publishing. They have kept abreast of modern developments within the national environment as well as any group in the province. It would, indeed, be wrong to say that the villagers are entirely unwilling participants in the Christianization of their traditions, or that the missionary is the only agent for change in this regard.

Among the novelties introduced since my last visit to Lamalera was a Catholic grotto, in a location called Dua Fero in open land to the east of the village, where during our stay Father Dupont conducted an outdoor mass. Unlike many other features of the sacred landscape of contemporary Catholicism, this site had not been chosen because of its significance in the pagan religion.

One area in which the ritual life of the community continues traditional precedent in vigorous form is the set of rites connected with building, using and maintaining the boats. Formerly, these rites would have been accompanied by the sacrifice of such animals as chickens and goats. Where in the past they would have used chicken blood to asperse the boats (Barnes 1974: 143), in recent decades they have substituted holy water. This practice was the subject of an interesting BA thesis that, more in the spirit of the 1970s than in that of inculturation, criticized this use of holy water as a form of syncretism (Kuben Odjan 1973).

Another area in which there has been a marked impact on local culture is that of ritual language. Like so many other eastern Indonesian communities, Lamalera has, or had, a special form of formal speech used for conducting ritual and relating legend (see Fox 1988). It would be impossible today to witness the use of this language in anything like its original setting. Indeed, it may be doubted whether many could claim any knowledge of it at all.⁵ Nevertheless, attempts are made to draw on the Lamalera dialect in Christian ceremonies, though in a much altered form. Examples may be found in the printed text of the mass performed on 22 June 1986, in celebration of the centenary of Lamalera's Catholicism (Beding

5. Examples of this form of speech, in dialects of the local Lamaholot language spoken farther to the east, were recorded by Father Paul Arndt in the 1930s and 1940s (Arndt 1951). Some traditional songs may be found in a published grammar of Lamaholot as spoken in Lamalera (Keraf 1978).

1986b; see also Hajon 1971). The precedent for incorporating the Lamalera dialect into Catholic ritual dates from 1921. Bode used the dialect as he spread his mission across the island, and in 1937 it was employed in the preparation of a prayer book for all the churches on Lembata (Keraf 1978: 2). Mass is now conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, and since the great majority has been educated to some extent in that language, the service is accessible to almost all. The Lamaholot language, therefore, has very little remaining ritual function, except marginally as songs and traditional phrasing are worked in to give local flavour to family and community ceremonies.

Art is another cultural feature in which Christian and traditional themes meet. In 1987, the altar wall of the church was painted with a large and effective painting of Christ on the beach in Lamalera, surrounded by villagers, boat sheds and characteristic fishing paraphernalia. Christ's clothing and physical features resembled those characteristic of the community. The artist who produced this mural derives from the village.

When the present church in the upper village first began to be used in 1975, the previous church was taken down, leaving only the raised stone and concrete flooring upon which it was erected. In conjunction with the centenary celebrations, Dominikus Labanoni Batafor, a trained sculptor and native of Lamalera, now living in Maumere, Flores, produced a commanding statue of Bode, which now stands at one end of this platform. Bode is portrayed in a cassock, his right hand stretched forward in blessing. The sculptor has, however, placed him on a *hāmā*, the bamboo harpooning platform that extends beyond the bow of the village whaling vessels. Below the bow, Batafor has inscribed the following:

Pater Bernardus Bode, SVD
 ✠Bilshausen, Jerman 20-08-1885
 †Steyl, Nederland 20-08-1978
 Berkarya di Lamalera-Lembata 1920-1951

Suba guburo, majo pajoro
 Nagarisip sama funo feli gere

[Father Bernard Bode, SVD; Born Bilshausen, Germany, 20 August 1885; Died Steyl, The Netherlands, 20 August 1978; Laboured in Lamalera, Lembata, 1920-1951.]

[Naga Peninsula [the south-west point of Lembata] with a sea breeze, sheltered by an umbrella, see the glow, like that of a star emerging from the surface of the sea.]

Boats carrying passengers from Larantuka, Flores, round the Naga (Dragon) Peninsula into the open Savu Sea toward the end of the journey to Lamalera. Since, for Lamalera, Larantuka was the source of Christianity, the religion is associated with this direction. Indeed, 'Serani' (Christianity) is another name for

Larantuka. A sea breeze at the south-west point of the island indicates that no dangers are in sight. Coming from this direction, Bode was a protector, emerging like a star rising from the sea. The fact that his birth and death dates coincide is remarked by villagers. In Indonesian conceptions, a person who has lived a good and long life will die when his days are complete, the date of his death coinciding with the date of his birth.

There is some irony in the fact that Bode appears at the bow of a whaling boat, emphasizing his role as a leader of the community. Villagers have often listened to sermons advising them of the desirability of doing away with their whaling. For a variety of reasons, this side of their subsistence economy has been in marked decline for over a decade (Barnes 1986: 308-12). However, even in 1987, and in the face of the continued drift of educated young people into non-traditional occupations, villagers insisted that whaling and fishing from the large boats would never disappear completely. That they continue to rebuild and maintain their boats even under present conditions is evidence of how closely community identity is linked to them. The boats are linked directly to the relationship between the living and the ancestors.⁶

Education has been another area of tension, which reached a peak in 1981-2. The mission provides education within the village up to the level of junior high school, and generations of boys and girls have benefited. Nevertheless, in the early 1980s, the issue arose as to whether one of the schools should be transferred from the church to the government. This issue became entangled with disputes about a small kiosk linked to the mission. Damaging, and perhaps ill-considered, charges were made, and the church issued excommunications against a number of prominent villagers. Eventually, aspects of the controversy were even aired in the regional Catholic magazine, *Dian*, in 1982. Fortunately, steps were taken to resolve the dispute, and by 1987, apologies having been offered and reconciliations achieved, the dispute was settled.

Conclusion

The shifts in aim and self-conception within the SVD mission in the Sepik that Huber (1988) has described have parallels in the Flores region (see Dietrich 1989). Some of these changes in attitude have been signalled by the literature reviewed in this article. Others are described in the recent study of the Flores SVD by the Anglican priest Paul Webb (1986).

6. Although the missionaries have been unsuccessful in reducing the importance of this aspect of Lamalera life, secular influences may have a greater impact. In 1987, one of the boats was rebuilt (with commercial timber and nylon rigging and bindings) to give demonstrations of simulated whaling for groups of tourists brought to the village for the purpose.

While it is true that European missionaries in the past indulged all too often in ethnocentrism, denigration of alien belief and cultural arrogance (cf. Beidelman 1982: 5), the new doctrine of inculturation is designed to ameliorate precisely these faults in mission practice. In some hands it may be put to imaginative use. To the degree that Indonesian nationals eventually assume genuine control over religious practice *and Church resources* (which need not mean the exclusion of Europeans), some form of accommodation with the local culture may be inevitable. Nevertheless, there is something deeply ambiguous about inculturation in a hierarchical church. Too often, the rhetoric of inculturation suggests a process of taking over local religion or, at least, stops short of conceding its self-sufficient independence from Christianity.⁷ Perhaps Beidelman's definition (1982: 2) of colonialism as 'cultural domination with enforced social change' describes the context of mission activity in Africa of the 1950s better than that of Indonesia in the 1990s, but the question of self-determination is still relevant.

The mission did arrive and establish itself in colonial circumstances. Its commitment to development through the Flores-Timor plan, financed in part with the assistance of the West German government (see Webb 1986: ch. 12), allies it with the national government's ideology of development and has given it immense prestige. The 1980 census shows that 79% of the population of the East Flores Regency declared themselves Catholic, and the figure for the whole of the Flores region is an even more impressive 86% (Biro Pusat Statistik 1981). As the SVD brother, Bill Burt told Webb (1986: 177), 'in Flores there are two governments. The official one and the richer and possibly more influential one, the Church.'

Beidelman applied his definition of colonialism not only to the influence of former colonial powers, but also 'to domination of the poor and uneducated masses by a privileged and powerful native elite fiercely determined to make changes for whatever reason' (1982: 2). The situation in Flores is of course not quite as bleak as this, from which the Church does take satisfaction. Nevertheless, the individual's freedom of choice, and indeed that of the Church as well (Webb 1986: 174), is limited by educational and economic circumstance, and by history and the political context. Limits are set by the colonial experience, by the traumas of the 1965 coup, by the state ideology of Pancasila (sometimes interpreted as insisting on commitment to one of the world religions), and by the shutting down of effective grassroots political activity by the Suharto government.

Many or all of those who might have provided 'partners in dialogue' from the other side of the divide were prevented from doing so by Bode, nor were they allowed to train replacements. In many respects, the appropriate time for inculturation would have been the beginning of the mission period. Nevertheless,

7. Although he ultimately takes a positive view of inculturation, Pieris claims (1988: 52-3) that inculturation is often 'the insertion of "the Christian religion minus European culture" into an "Asian culture minus non-Christian religion"'. Thai Buddhists have bitterly criticized the use of their sacred symbols for Christian purposes and have charged that this form of inculturation is a form of disguised imperialism.

these are different times and the people of Lamalera are different. Given an opportunity to engage in an effective dialogue permitting them to exercise a larger say in community religious practice, they will want to do so in terms of their present interests and experience. They will certainly not wish to reconstruct forgotten practices of the past, although it would be interesting to see just what is remembered and valued.

Webb (1986: 174) speaks of the signs of disappointment and disillusionment among the older priests in the face of the changes following from Vatican II that loosened their control in the villages. Younger Indonesian priests, in contrast, are enthusiastic, although there is still a strongly European flavour to church worship. But the young may eventually become conservative too. It remains to be seen whether the practical implications of inculturation are as radical as some readings of the literature about it would suggest, or whether it will in fact prove to be a rhetorically softer but equally intrusive means of directing cultural and religious change by a largely external and hierarchically organized institution of authority.

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