

## 7 Towards a Contextual Theology for Nias and the Batu Islands

### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

The era of Mission and Colonialism is over. The churches of Indonesia now realize the importance of liberating themselves from theological dependency, missionary personnel and the funds of mission boards and foreign churches. At the same time they recognize that they cannot neglect ecumenical ties.<sup>559</sup> These convictions were formulated in 1980 by the ninth general assembly of the council of churches in Indonesia in Tomohon. The general assembly was aware that the churches, which had grown inside the scaffolding of the tribal context, have to support one another to become mature and self-sufficient. The state of dependency on mission boards or foreign churches had to come to an end, once and for all. Therefore they declared:<sup>560</sup>

In the beginnings of the Indonesian churches, in the age of the missionaries, the 'bridgehead' for theology, personnel, and finances had been with the foreign churches which sent out the missionaries to Indonesia. Now, the 'bridgehead' has to be built inside Indonesia in a contextual manner, while at the same time, as an expression of the universality of the church, the relationships with the foreign churches must be maintained.

This statement makes it clear that to bring about self-sufficiency each church has to develop a theology that is both local and universal. In other words, the Indonesian 'tribal churches', including the Niasan churches, must search for their own identities by developing contextual theologies.

This search for ecclesiastical identity in post-colonial Indonesia is a complex undertaking. On the one hand, these 'tribal churches' are facing a pluralistic Indonesian society. On the other hand, they are confronted with the challenges of modernisation and globalisation. While struggling with these external problems, the 'tribal churches' also wrestle with internal tensions due to the encounter between Gospel and culture. These internal tensions are usually caused by elements of the primal religion and tribal culture that have survived inside the communion of believers. Church officials believe these elements to be the remaining dark elements of paganism, which have to be removed by the light of the Gospel. The BNKP, like other churches, has struggled with these issues throughout its history.

Herbert Schekatz, a former missionary to the BNKP, served on Nias after World War II. Reflecting on the nature of Niasan Christianity, he holds that the essence of the primal religion of the Ono Niha has never changed, and that it seems that it will never change. During the age of the first missionary encounters, the missionaries focused only on rejecting the *adu zatua*, without taking into consideration the totality of the cosmology of the Ono Niha. Because of this limited point of view, until now, the church has focused on matters relating to primal religion and the *adat*

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<sup>559</sup> PGI, *Dalam Kemantapan Kebersamaan Menapaki Dekade Penuh Harapan*, 1991, p. 142.

<sup>560</sup> *Ibid.*

without ever solving the problems relating to them. The primal religion is rooted in the life of the Ono Niha, and it surely served its purpose of preserving life by solving problems.<sup>561</sup> According to Schekatz, the real problem is that the primal religion is concerned only about the past and not the future, while the challenges facing the Ono Niha today are about finding their way in the face of rapid change.

Schekatz' deliberations seem to be quite true if we consider the discussions inside the BNKP, reiterated year in and year out during the synod assemblies. During the fifty-second synod assembly in 2002, the synod board of the BNKP reported on the weaknesses and the challenges faced by the church, saying.<sup>562</sup>

1. The mental state of the members of the congregations is still dominated by the values of traditional culture which are not constructive.
2. There is the weakness of an individualistic, materialistic and consumerist mentality.
3. Capacity in the fields of church administration and finances is weak.
4. Many members of the congregations have little regard for involvement in church activities.
5. Remnants of the primal religion of Nias still exercise control over parts of the life of the congregation and its ministers. These remnants include, for example the belief in the spirits of the ancestors (*malaika zatua*), superstition (*takhayul*)<sup>563</sup>, primordial ties (*fabanuasa*), and the influence of dark forces or occultism (*elemu*).
6. The challenge of proselytising by some other religions which draw away members of the BNKP, as well as the separatist attitude of some members.
7. The challenges to members of the congregations who immigrate from Nias to other areas.
8. The backward agricultural system.
9. The effects of global developments.

This report indicates that the BNKP is aware of the ever-increasing complexity of the conditions and the challenges it faces. Beside the problems concerning the primal religion and the *adat* which are very much alive in the everyday life of the Ono Niha, the BNKP also faces the contemporary challenges of globalisation.

The above-mentioned weaknesses and challenges are deeply rooted in the historical experience of Niasan Christianity. Focussing on the BNKP, there has never been a time without conflict or some kind of schism. The BNKP has also been weak in its struggle to find justice and truth with the government. Instead, it has always been focused on matters concerning the *adat*, especially the problem of dowry (*böwö*), of polygamy, of resurgent paganism, etc.<sup>564</sup> The BNKP has always been deficient in its efforts to write its own indigenous theology<sup>565</sup>, in formulating its church

<sup>561</sup> Interview with H. Schekatz on 27 June 2002 in Wuppertal.

<sup>562</sup> 'Himpunan Hasil Persidangan Majelis Sinode ke-52 BNKP, 2 s/d 7 Juli 2002 di Lahewa', p. 11. (Arsip BNKP).

<sup>563</sup> 'When the eagles cry, a member of the village community will die; when the rainbow is close to the ground, a chief will pass away' (*na me'e moyo ma sumbila so zimate; na aso ndrumi sadogodogo ba gahé mbanua, mate zalawa*).

<sup>564</sup> Cf. T. Telaumbanua and U. Hummel, 'Inquiry', 2000.

<sup>565</sup> In reaction to the teachings of Ama Haogö, the BNKP banned his writings and, in 1967, excommunicated him from the BNKP. In addition, the BNKP distributed a pamphlet with the title 'Haniha Döi-Nia?' (What is His name?), which explained the Biblical teachings about God. Despite

order, in creating contextual liturgies, and in finding diaconal means of overcoming poverty. Year in and year out, from synod assembly to synod assembly, the BNKP has always focused on cultural problems. It is as if the BNKP moved around in a circle without ever having a breakthrough.

In this chapter, while not ignoring the important developments in some of the other Niasan churches, the author will focus on the BNKP's program for carrying out its calling within local, national and international contexts. As a model for Niasan Christianity, the internal and the external challenges of the BNKP will be discussed. A new paradigm for constructing a contextual theology for the BNKP will be developed.

## 7.2 DOING THEOLOGY IN THE NIASAN CHURCH

The former *ephorus* of the BNKP, Reverend Bazatulö Chr. Hulu, speaking about the necessary effort of the BNKP for constructing its theology in a contextual manner, said the following:<sup>566</sup>

The BNKP resembles a 'foster child' in the sense of being constantly under the care of its 'mother church' and anxiously conserving and transmitting its heritage. Even though there had been some attempts, the BNKP has never engaged in contextual theology in a systematic way.

Hulu's statement was based on the existing approach inside the BNKP. In almost all fields, such as doctrine, liturgy, church order, church discipline, and counselling, the BNKP continues its services in a pre-World War II manner. The problem with this kind of theology, as with the whole heritage of the missionary era, is that it originated in the context of the European churches.<sup>567</sup> This theological heritage is incapable of answering the contemporary challenges of modernisation or globalisation in the pluralistic Indonesian context.

Nevertheless, as Hulu has pointed out, there have been 'some attempts' towards a contextual theology inside the BNKP, although these have not been 'systematic'. These attempts have been inspired by the theological deliberations in other churches in Asia and Africa. In particular the BNKP has been influenced by the ecumenical work of the World Council of Churches<sup>568</sup> and the United Evangelical Mission (Barmen), and the ecumenical discussions held at the Indonesian Council / Communion of Churches (DGI / PGI). The BNKP efforts have entailed organisational reforms (church order), developments in worship (liturgies and hymnals), initiatives to overcome poverty, and discussions concerning Gospel and culture.

On the one hand, in its encounters with traditional culture, since 1965 the BNKP has followed the missionaries approach. Starting in the 1980s, there have been attempts of change. However, these followed the old paradigm and they did not

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this, until the 1990s, the teachings of Ama Haogö kept on enjoying vast popularity among the Ono Niha and were often discussed in the Pastor's Conventions. Cf. 'Hasil Rapat Kerja Pendeta Jemaat Se-BNKP, tahun 1998 di Gunungsitoli' (Arsip BNKP).

<sup>566</sup> B.C. Hulu, 'Terlalu lama menjadi piaraan', in: D.P. Lase (ed.), 'Menuju Gereja yang Mandiri', 2005, p. 1.

<sup>567</sup> Cf. Th. van den End, *Harta Dalam Bejana*, 1982, pp. 345-355.

<sup>568</sup> Cf. S. Coe, 'Contextualizing Theology', in: G.A. Anderson and T.F. Stransky (eds.), *Mission Trends III*, 1978, p. 20.

succeed. Only in the 1990s has there been a growing awareness of the need for a contextual theology which could stand up to the challenges of globalisation. To understand these developments more thoroughly, some of the most important deliberations and struggles inside the BNKP after 1965 have to be outlined.

### 7.2.1 Continuing the Old Approach

In Ch. 4 to Ch. 6 we have seen that the missionaries and their indigenous assistants could see nothing good in the primal religion of the Ono Niha. The *amakhoita* prohibited any contact with the ancestral rites. Anyone who broke this regulation was as a minimum reprimanded harshly, or more severely was excluded from receiving the sacraments. This was effectively an excommunication. Although the Ono Niha had embraced Christianity, it was very difficult for them to leave the *adat*. It was and still is part of their lives.

The BNKP continued its legalistic approach to solving the problems that arose from the traditional *adat* and contemporary popular culture. In 1980 the forty-second synod assembly on Pulau Tello, passed a formal amendment called *amakhoita BNKP*. Later it was renamed *Peraturan Penggembalaan BNKP*.<sup>569</sup> It maintained previous commandments and prohibitions while adding a few more rules. These addressed new challenges to the BNKP, such as:

1. The teachings of Ama Haogö<sup>570</sup> on the names of God, labeled heretical in 1967, were now prohibited for use by members of the BNKP.
2. Due to the alleged 'sheep stealing' by rival Christian churches such as the Roman Catholic Church, the Fa'awösa, Seventh-Day Adventists, Pentecostals, etc., members of the BNKP were prohibited from marrying members of these organizations<sup>571</sup>
3. In addition to the traditional dark practices of the *adat* (e.g., polygamy), modern 'heathen' phenomena such as horoscopes, fortune-telling saying, and the reading of someone's palm were prohibited.

Punishment for breaking these rules was similar to that in the primal religion, i.e., being reprimanded by the *sinenge* or *pandita*, exclusion from the sacraments, withholding consecration of marriage by a minister and denial of a church burial ceremony.

There are three fundamental reasons for this legalistic approach. First, the leaders of the BNKP show great loyalty to the conservative practices and teachings of European missionaries.<sup>572</sup> The pre-World War II synodal regulations, the Disciplinary Code and educational books are still regarded as the authoritative standard. Secondly, a lack of trained ministries means congregations are often led by *sinenge* and *satua Niha Keriso* who cannot differentiate between the pattern of the Gospel and that of the *adat*. Finally, since the 1980s, there has been a rapid increase in the number of pastors with an Evangelical or Charismatic educational

<sup>569</sup> 'Himpunan Peraturan BNKP', Gunungsitoli 2005, pp. 157-168 (Arsip BNKP).

<sup>570</sup> Cf. Ch. 5.6.4.3 and Ch. 6.2.1.1.

<sup>571</sup> Cf. 'Peraturan Penggembalaan di BNKP V, 5', 1981 (Arsip BNKP).

<sup>572</sup> Cf. 'Laporan Rapat Pengurus Besar BNKP Nias tentang Pertemuan dengan Ds. H.F. de Kleine, Inspektur RMG dari Barmen', 21 Oktober 1954 (Arsip BNKP).

background. These emphasize sanctification and often have a legalistic and moralistic theology similar to that of the old approach.

### 7.2.2 Need for a New Approach

Since 1970s, the idea of contextual theology had become a regular topic on the agenda of the churches in Asia and Africa. The awareness of the need for renewal of liturgy and church order grew stronger in many of these churches. They are questioning the value of their existing Western heritage, and are considering contextual alternatives.<sup>573</sup>

In the Indonesian churches, this awareness was manifested in the 1980 PGI-program called 'Towards Self-Sufficiency in Theology, Personnel and Finances'.<sup>574</sup> How did this affect the churches on Nias? As has been explained previously, the liturgy of the Niasan Protestant churches (BNKP, AMIN and ONKP) was almost an exact copy of the European 'mother churches'. This heritage was never really questioned, except for some technical matters concerning the role of the leader of the liturgy.<sup>575</sup>

As early as 1965, a team was appointed by the synod board of the BNKP to revise the *Agendre*. The synod assembly held in 1970 adopted a new *Agendre*.<sup>576</sup> There was, however, not a single contextual amendment, not to speak of an overall acculturated approach. The new *Agendre* had the same contents, but a different structure. Whereas formerly it followed the pattern of the circle of life<sup>577</sup> (ranging from the birth of a child to the death of a member of the church), the same contents was now arranged in three sections: Sunday services in accordance with the ecclesiastical year; forms for the celebration of the Sacraments; services which are not of a sacramental nature, such as confirmation, consecration of marriage, the order of the burial, ordination of the different ministries, orders for excommunicating those who trespassed, and receiving back into the community those who repented. From the point of view of contextualization, it has to be questioned whether this new arrangement was a theological development or a decline.

During the 1980s, the BNKP faced four new challenges in liturgical matters. The first was the problem of the liturgical language. Up until then, the liturgical language had been only in the Niasan vernacular (*Li Nono Niha*). Many young people were no longer fluent in the *Li Nono Niha* but preferred church services in *Bahasa Indonesia* (BI). As well, in the Niasan Diaspora on Sumatra and Java, many spouses of the Ono Niha, who had joined the BNKP, originated from other ethnic backgrounds. They also preferred attending church in the BI. A second problem was related to regional dialects. The church circuits of the Batu Islands and Teluk Dalam in South Nias asked for permission to use their particular dialects. A third problem came as a result

<sup>573</sup> Cf. S.W. Ariarajah, *Injil dan Kebudayaan*, 1997, pp. 33-39.

<sup>574</sup> PGI, *Dalam Kemantapan Kebersamaan Menapaki Dekade Penuh Harapan*, 1991, pp. 142-147.

<sup>575</sup> In 1952, the synod assembly decided the following: 1. The Votum at the beginning of the Sunday service must be done as a prayer without the leader of the liturgy raising his hands; 2. The benediction is taken from either II Corinthians 13:13 or Numbers 6:24-26. Only an ordained pastor may raise his hands for the benediction. In the early 1960s, the question of pronouncing the Apostolic Creed in the different dialects and styles (i.e., spoken or sung) was discussed. Unfortunately, the BNKP synod decided that the creed should be said in a uniform way.

<sup>576</sup> *Turia Röfa*, 4/4 (1970).

<sup>577</sup> *Agendre Banua Niha Keriso Protestan*, 1988 (Arsip BNKP)

of the influence of charismatic groups. Members of the BNKP who had attended charismatic rallies requested that the liturgy of the BNKP be less rigid, shorter and more joyful. Finally, challenges arose due to the ecumenical movement. The national and international ecumenical bodies encouraged the development of contextual liturgies. Representatives of the BNKP, who had attended ecumenical meetings and workshops, brought home these ideas of enculturation.

Confronted with these challenges, each and every synod assembly of the BNKP since the 1980s has discussed liturgical reforms. However, the matter has never been settled satisfactorily. As of 1985, worship services conducted in BI in some towns on Nias and Pulau Tello, and of course in the Diaspora, were translations from the Niasan original and showed no signs of enculturation. There is only one standard liturgy for the regular Indonesian Sunday church service (the liturgy for the Sunday of the Trinity), which is used on every occasion, while for each Niasan Sunday church service there is a specific liturgy in accordance with the ecclesiastical year.

A very important aspect of the liturgy is praising God through music. Looking at the development of the *Soera Zinunö*, one of the two hymnals<sup>578</sup> of the BNKP, a similar process as in the *Agendre* can be observed. The synod assembly in 1969 appointed a team to revise the hymnal. The reason for this was that some of the lyrics inherited from the European missionaries were considered clumsy and certain words could no longer be understood by the congregations. In 1972, the synod acknowledged the alterations suggested by the team. These, however, as in the case of the *Agendre*, did not touch on the contents, but only referred to linguistic adjustments. The new revised edition, titled *Buku Zinunö*<sup>579</sup>, took into account neither the artistic spirit and the musical traditions, nor the contemporary challenges of the Ono Niha. For the worship services in BI, the BNKP did not create an special hymnal, but took over the *Nyanyian Rohani Mazmur*, the *Kidung Jemaat* and (particularly for the Sunday school) the *Kidung Ceria* from other Protestant churches in Indonesia.

Awareness the need to develop the BNKP hymnal more contextually grew stronger during the 1980s. The reasons were:

1. The limited variety of hymns in the official Niasan hymnal.
2. The musical notation system was no longer understood by the younger generation. There was a demand to change this into a musical notation system in which notes are assigned numbers.
3. The influence of charismatic groups, operating all over Indonesia, including Nias and the Batu Islands, caused some members of the BNKP to criticize the rigidity of the hymns.

In 2000, the synod board of the BNKP asked the music commission of the BNKP to revise the *Buku Zinunö* to take into account the following considerations:

1. Adding the songs of the Great Awakening (*Sinunö Wangesa*).<sup>580</sup>
2. Changing the notation system to one where notes are assigned numbers.<sup>581</sup>

<sup>578</sup> The other hymnal, the Batunese *Soere Nainö*, was not revised, but, in 1996, reprinted under the title of *Buku Nainö* in its original form and contents.

<sup>579</sup> 'Laporan Komisi Literatur BNKP di Nias Pada Sydang Sinode ke-37 tahun 1972 di Sogae'adu' (Arsip BNKP).

<sup>580</sup> Cf. Ch. 4.6.5.7.

3. Creatively using elements of Niasan culture. Including traditional musical instruments and traditional dance combined with a Christian message, etc.<sup>582</sup>

Although these are new developments of a more contextual approach, they are still in an experimental phase and have not yet been accepted as a standard for the worship services of the BNKP. Though music is very important to the Ono Niha, developing a contextual theology would demand a much broader scope.

Since the 1950s, besides the liturgy, renewing the church order has also on the agenda. Mainly due to internal conflicts inside the BNKP, four types of divisions can be differentiated. Firstly, the great schisms of 1946 (AMIN), 1952 (ONKP) and 1992 (BKPN and BNKP-I). Secondly, schisms in individual congregations where groups of members joined other churches (e.g., Roman Catholic Church, Pentecostal Church, AMIN, ONKP). Thirdly, numerous splits in local congregations caused by internal conflicts but not leading to successions from the BNKP. The reasons for the splits and schisms were:

1. Conflicts among the leaders at the synod board level.
2. Resurgences of *adat*-structure, such as the *banua*-model.
3. Conflicts arising from the *adat* which were brought into the church.<sup>583</sup>
4. Exploitation of the local congregation or the church as a whole by former noblemen, such as *salawa*, for regaining power.
5. Poverty that has caused members of congregations to join other churches for material benefits.
6. Lack of pastoral care by the established churches and the offer of individual counseling offered by others.
7. Interventions by the government in internal church affairs (e.g., during the Soeharto-regime).

As a reaction to these challenges, the church order of the BNKP was repeatedly revised by the synod assemblies at 1955, 1973 and 1990. The changes, however, did not solve the essential problems. In 1955, some of the power of the *ephorus* was transferred to the synod board, of which the *ephorus* is the chairperson.<sup>584</sup> In 1973, the basic presbyterial-synodal structure of the BNKP was asserted as against congregationalist tendencies. Furthermore, the synod board (now named *Badan Pekerja Harian*, BPH) was clearly defined as the executive body of the church. It became accountable to a controlling board (*Badan Perkerja Sinode*, BPS) which possessed certain legislative powers between synod assemblies. At the synod assembly in 1980, the BNKP confronted two serious challenges: 1. a polarization between the executive synod board (BPH) and the legislative synod board (BKS) threatened to paralyze the decision-making process; 2. some congregations

<sup>581</sup> 'Keputusan dan Ketetapan Persidangan Majelis Sinode ke-51 BNKP', 2000, p. 10. (Arsip BNKP).

<sup>582</sup> It is advisable that the BNKP uses the elements of Niasan culture in its worship to God and in the proclamation of the Gospel. This could be done by using the traditional *maena* combined with a Christian message, as well as the traditional musical instruments of the Ono Niha, such as the *aramba*, the *göndra*, the *faritia* and the *doli-doli* in the Sunday worship service and in other celebrations', cf. 'Himpunan Hasil Persidangan Sinode ke 51', 2000, p. 10 (Arsip BNKP).

<sup>583</sup> Laporan Sidang Sinode BNKP Nias tahun 1969 (Arsip BNKP). Cf. W. Lempp, *Benih yang Tumbuh XII*, 1984, p 23.

<sup>584</sup> Cf. Ch. 4.6.5.4 and Ch. 5.3.1.

demanding autonomy within the BNKP. In answer to these challenges, the synod assembly in 1990 authorized a revised church order which resolved that all the members of the executive synod board (now named BPHMS) become members of the legislative synod board (now named BPMS) and the *ephorus* becomes the chairperson of both the BPHMS and the BPMS. Concerning the problem of the demand for autonomy, no solution other than changing of names was found.<sup>585</sup>

An altogether new element of the BNKP's revised church order of 1990 was the incorporation of the Indonesian state ideology, the *Pancasila*, as the principle on which the church base its life within Indonesian society and state. This, however, was less the result of contextualization than submission to the Soeharto-regime with its demands for uniformity of every aspect of public life.

The repeated revisions of the church order had thus not answered the above-mentioned seven reasons for the splits and schisms which had occurred in the BNKP. The tensions inside the church did not decrease. This painfully manifested itself in the two major schisms after the synod assembly in 1992, which occurred both in South Nias, in the form of the *Banua Keriso Protestant Nias* (BKPN) and in North Nias where the *Banua Niha Keriso Protestant Indonesia* (BNKP-I) separated itself from the BNKP. In both cases, the mingling of the Soeharto-regime in the internal affairs of the BNKP created an atmosphere conducive to the divisions. Some influential businessmen, chiefs and pastors opposed the legitimate leadership of the BNKP, and, since they were not elected by the synod assembly, formed their own church organizations. The BKPN justified its separation citing the differences in culture between South and North Nias, while the BNKP-I claimed to have restored the principles of the constitution of the BNKP. With all of these tensions and schisms, the BNKP was not able to implement its programs to become a pioneer in the development on Nias and the Batu Islands, nor could it play a significant role in the ecumenical movement on a national and international level.

### 7.2.3 Community Development and Participation in Politics

In general the reality of the churches in Asia (and in many other parts of the world) is very much determined by poverty, authoritarianism, discrimination, and plurality. From within this context, the Asian churches reflect on the meaning of the Gospel for the poor and oppressed. The result of these reflections brought forth different kinds of liberation theologies, for example, the Theology of the Struggle (Philippines), the Theology of the Powerless People or *Minjung* (Korea), the Theology of the Outcasts or *Dalit* (India), Feminist Theology, etc. On the other hand, the Asian context with its diversity of religions and culture demand a strong emphasis on inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue.<sup>586</sup>

In the frame of contextualization theology, the seventh general assembly of the Council of Churches in Indonesia Churches (DGI) in 1971 formulated the mandate and task of churches as follows:<sup>587</sup>

We are called to participate in the responsibility to liberate human beings from their sufferings which are caused by underdevelopment, poverty, illness, fear, and the lack of

<sup>585</sup> I.e., the 'branch congregation' (*filial*) was renamed 'congregation' (*jemaat*), the 'congregation' was renamed 'district' (*distrik*), and the 'district' was renamed 'church circuit' (*resor*).

<sup>586</sup> Cf. A.A. Yewangoe, *Theologia Crucis di Asia*, Jakarta, 1989.

<sup>587</sup> Cf. DGI, *Notulen Sidang Raya ke-7 tahun 1971*, 1976, p. 93.

the rule of law. We are called to struggle for justice in the daily life, justice in the fields of economy and politics, justice between individuals and groups, justice in the social structure, as well as international justice. We are called to participate in the defeat of falseness, hypocrisy, corruption, and dishonesty. We are called to raise the level of welfare of all human beings, both in a material and in a spiritual sense.

If this resolution of the DGI is compared to the actual activities of the BNKP concerning its struggle against poverty, it has to be acknowledged that very little has been achieved so far. The BNKP has focused its effort for social development in three ways:

1. Charity. From 1950s until the 1970s, the BNKP mainly focused on charity for neglected children, education (a number of church-owned schools were opened), medical care (one hospital was added in Hilisimaetanö), a training-centre for skills, and operating a ship-service. These charities could only be offered with the support of church-based organizations in Germany. After foreign support ceased, these activities came to an end.
2. Community development. The idea of the Gospel as a power of liberation entered the new church order of 1973. For its implementation, in 1974, the BNKP offered a workshop on the participation of the BNKP in the development of the Regency of Nias (which included the Batu Islands). The results were community development programs, including activities such as: the training of local social workers (*motivator pedesaan*), cooperative or credit unions, agriculture and animal husbandry. These activities continue, but until recently have not contributed substantially to the abolishment of poverty. The reason for this is that on the one hand, this has not become an overall social program – only certain individuals have benefited from it; on the other hand, the concept of the participation in development (*partisipasi dalam pembangunan*) did not imply any original initiatives from the BNKP, but was limited to mere uncritical assistance in the national governmental programs (particularly under the regime of Soeharto). At the fiftieth synod of the BNKP in 1997 in the *Hosiana*-Church in Gunungsitoli, a specific program named *Program Oikonomia* was added to the other major programs. This included the development of the economy in church and society, Legal Aid, Human Rights, and Politics, as well as various other activities summed up under the term *sosial budaya*, which includes tourism, art, etc. A key term in this program is 'transformation' (*transformasi*), indicating that the goal of this policy was to transform the whole of Niasan society. The implementation of the program, however, was much less inspiring than its text. When it was evaluated by the fifty-second synod assembly in 2002 in Lahewa, five reasons for its failure were given: first, the paradigm of the BNKP's service had not changed; second, the qualitative limitations in human resources; third, the lack of funds for realizing the programs; fourth, the Asian monetary crisis (which began in 1997) which hit Indonesia very hard; finally, the *program oikonomia* was not accepted by the whole of Niasan society as a common strategy of combating poverty.
3. Participation in politics. During the long authoritarian rule of Soeharto (1965/67-1998), the attitude of the churches towards politics may be characterized as 'permissive'. The policy of the government was accepted

without criticism. On Nias this became apparent right at the outset, when, in 1967, the social system of Nias was forcefully changed by the abolition of the *öri*-system. The church received this policy, which destroyed the last important traditional social structures, without a word of criticism. Furthermore, the BNKP joined the government in the discrimination against alleged communists (PKI) by dismissing some church elders. In its report to the synod in 1990, the synod board of the BNKP ruled that the BNKP should support the implementation of the state doctrine (the Soeharto-version of *Pancasila*, called P4<sup>588</sup>), the state birth-control program (KB), the program for raising awareness to pay taxes (*Sadar Pajak*), the raising of awareness for tourism, and the so-called *Data Haogö Mbanuada* (the 'Let-us-build-our-village-Program').

During the fiftieth synod assembly in 1997, the BNKP discussed its service in the field of politics, but it did not get any further than finding a definition for the political activity of the church. There was, however, no realistic political program for building a just, democratic and prosperous society. Many *pandita* still maintain a strict separation between religion and politics, not only because of the colonial heritage but also because of Evangelical and/or Charismatic influences. Nevertheless, in the course of the *reformasi*-era, which began in 1997, the synod board gave its permission and support to individual ministers who entered politics, even though the principle that the church does not involve itself in party-politics was still upheld.

### 7.3 TOWARDS A PARADIGM OF CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY IN THE NIASAN CHURCH

#### 7.3.1 From Indigenisation to Contextualization

From the description above of 'Doing theology in the BNKP now', we have seen that the BNKP has attempted time and again to find solutions to the challenges arising from the encounter between the Gospel and indigenous culture. On the one hand the method applied, however, has been to guard the heritage of the missionaries, and on the other hand, maintain very strong emphasis on implementing church discipline (*amakhöita*). The church has not been able to transform itself and thus it has also not been able to transform society. Although the majority of Ono Niha are Christians, it is doubtful whether biblical values such as justice, peace, mercy, solidarity and good stewardship have become part and parcel of their every day life. To a large extent, the BNKP has remained dependent on its German partners in matters concerning theology and finances, while its human resources also did not fulfil its needs. Therefore, as a prerequisite for a more general development, it is now important for the Niasan church to transform its theological approach.

What does the author mean by a contextual theology? First of all, contextual theology cannot be limited to 'indigenisation', which is emphasising the relationship between the Gospel and the old traditional culture. This neglects that culture is constantly changing. Contextualization, while not disregarding the influence of traditional culture, also deals with contemporary factors determining the context,

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<sup>588</sup> P4 is the abbreviation for 'Pedoman, Penghayatan dan Pengamalan Pancasila'.

such as secularisation, modern technology and science, human rights awareness, etc.<sup>589</sup>

Contextualization cannot also be limited to an effort of adjusting the Gospel to a specific cultural frame without a critical reflection on both the presentation of the Gospel (e.g., whether a doctrine formulated in a western context indeed clearly conveys the message in an Asian context), and on the nature of the 'frame' (e.g., whether the artistic expressions and traditional symbols really relate to the Good News conveyed). Our understanding is that contextualization has to have a prophetic nature, and always has to be the result of an honest encounter between the Word of God and concrete situations.<sup>590</sup> The Word of God enters the context and transforms it from within. In different contexts, the programs for contextualization have different priorities. In a certain situation, the demand for justice may overweigh, in another context, it may be the quest for freedom from patriarchal suppression, and in yet other contexts it may be the alleviation from poverty or overcoming conflict through dialogue, etc. The main principle, however, which should never be absent at any time or place, is that the living Word of God enters this world to save it from the bondage of sin, which is both individual rebellion against God and social injustice.<sup>591</sup>

### 7.3.2 Ecumenical and Evangelical Positions

It is not only the task of churches in the 'Third World' to engage in contextual theology, but of churches everywhere. Although Christians believe that the origins of the church do not lie in this world but in the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2), the churches nevertheless have to be rooted in their particular contexts. Each church has its particular contexts. These can vary within one church, from congregation to congregation. Therefore, the local culture has to become the ground on which a local theology is being developed. This, however, does not mean that the Gospel makes compromises. Instead, the truth of the Gospel will transform all those elements of culture that destroy life and hold people in bondage. The communication of the Gospel in a critical and enlightening way calls us to distinguish, compare and reinvent. This can only be learned if a particular church opens itself to the ecumenical movement and to non-theological academic disciplines. Singgih has argued that three contexts have to be taken into consideration by the church when developing its teachings: the Bible, the doctrinal traditions of the churches, and the context of the local cultures.<sup>592</sup> Contextual theology should not only study history but also, with serious concern for the social changes, develop concepts for the future. The study of traditional culture is important, but just as challenging is the analysis of the contemporary cultural reality that the community is facing.<sup>593</sup> Here,

<sup>589</sup> Cf. S. Coe, 'Contextualizing Theology', in: G.H. Anderson and T.F. Stransky (ed.), *Mission Trends III: Third World Theologies*, 1976, p. 20. Cf. K. Koyama, *Water Buffalo Theology*, 1999, p. 15.

<sup>590</sup> Cf. E. Darmaputera, 'Menuju teologi Kontekstual di Indonesia', in: E. Darmaputera (ed.), *Konteks Berteologi di Indonesia*, 1988, p. 9. cf. A. Riyanti, 'Sinopsis Konteks dan Kontekstualisasi Iman dalam Rangka "Membangun Gereja dari Konteks"', in: A. Riyanti (ed.), *Membangun Gereja dari Konteks*, Malang, 2004, pp. 2-5. Cf. E.G. Singgih, *Dari Israel ke Asia*, 1982, pp. 17-29.

<sup>591</sup> Yeow Choo Lak, *Saat untuk Bertindak*, 1992, p. 9.

<sup>592</sup> Cf. E.G. Singgih, *Dari Israel Ke Asia*, 1982, pp. 59-71.

<sup>593</sup> *Ibid.*; cf. S. Coe, 'Kontekstualisasi Sebagai Jalan Menuju Pembaruan', in: D.J. Elwood (ed.), *Teologi Kristen Asia*, 1992, p. 10. Cf. E.G. Singgih, *Dari Israel Ke Asia*, 1982, p. 13. Cf. L. Newbigin, *Injil Dalam Masyarakat Majemuk*, 1993, p. 119.

both in the academic institutions and in inter-confessional and inter-religious dialogues, as well as in the individual encounters of people from different backgrounds, ecumenical relations of a church play a vital role.

Unfortunately, the need for contextual theology is not yet felt by many Evangelical and Charismatic churches in Indonesia, nor by the traditional Protestant churches, including the BNKP. According to Richard A. D. Siwu<sup>594</sup>, however, some Evangelicals have begun to develop an Asian contextual theology. They want to rid themselves of the dependency on Western theology. However, pre-Christian religious traditions are not taken into consideration at all. The Biblical truth is considered to be a universal, uniform doctrine that enters a particular culture like a foreigner dressed up in traditional clothing. But, was Jesus Christ a foreigner born in Bethlehem? Was he not a Jew, a genuine member of a particular cultural and religious community? And is Jesus Christ therefore also not an Ono Niha to the Ono Niha, a genuine member – yes the head – of the Banua Niha Keriso?

This Evangelical approach is not much more biblical than the approach of certain Charismatic groups. These are worse than the missionaries of old, rejecting all traditional culture as works of the devil. One such group, which exercises a certain influence on members of the BNKP in the city of Medan on Sumatra, is the 'Zone of Christ's Mission' (*Kawasan Misi Kristus* or KMK). A member of the KMK, Henry J. Silalahi, wrote a book on the 'Adat Ceremonies of the Batak in View of the Gospel'<sup>595</sup>, in which he describes the adat of the Batak as completely contradictory to and un-reconcilable with the Gospel. According to Silalahi, the *adat* is an expression of idolatry (*hasipelebeguan*) that manifests itself only in the dark and is an instrument of Satan used to mislead human beings. Therefore, a disciple of Christ would have to cut all links to the *adat*. Neither the approach of the Evangelicals that excludes the possibility of a holistic transformation of culture, including the roots in the primal religion through the Gospel, nor that of the Charismatic KMK, which downright condemns all traditional culture (and practically replaces it with a kind of North-American culture) answer the challenge of biblical theology. This challenge is to bring together the text (the Word of God) and the context (the world) in the belief that something completely new will grow from this encounter, a *banua* that bears the identity of both.

#### 7.4 CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT OF NIAS AND THE BATU ISLANDS

In contextual theologies, there has to be a good analysis of the context, meaning the time and place in all its dimensions of life, a respect for the living values of the community (both traditional and contemporary), and a creative and critical endeavour to bring together the text and the context, resulting in a dialectical relationship between the universal message of the Gospel (*kerygma*) and the contextual reality of life (culture).

The development of a Niasan contextual theology has to have as its starting point the practice of the BNKP. This practice should take place predominantly on the local level (e.g., BNKP congregations in specific regions on Nias, or in big cities,

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<sup>594</sup> Cf. R.A.D. Siwu, *Misi Dalam Pandangan Ekumenikal dan Evangelikal Asia 1910-1961-1991*, 1996, pp. 283ff.

<sup>595</sup> Cf. H.J. Silalahi, *Pandangan Injil Terhadap Upacara Adat Batak*, 2000.

such as Jakarta), but increasingly also on the national level (e.g., participation in the PGI), and even, though to a limited extent, on the international level (e.g., UEM and LWF).

#### 7.4.1 Ethnicity

The BNKP was born and bred within a tribal setting, in which the Ono Niha are the absolute majority. This disposition is described in a popular Niasan proverb, saying: 'the religion, the *adat*, and the government, each have their own way' (*sara lala hada, sara lala ugamo, ba sara göi lala fareta*). This proverb indicates that the original integrity of the Niasan culture has been fragmented.<sup>596</sup>

On the other hand, the BNKP is still following in the tracks of the missionaries of old, rejecting everything linked to the primal religion. Nevertheless, remnants of the pre-Christian beliefs still remain strong and sometime even re-germinate under certain conditions. On numerous occasions, the spirits of the ancestors are asked for their blessings. All kinds of taboos (*famoni*) still exist in the *adat* and in times of crises many people prefer medicine men or shamans (*tohu danga* or *duku*) to the physicians and pastors. These 'heathen' beliefs lead a clandestine existence in a dualistic relationship with the formal religion of Christianity. Both deeply influence the life of the Ono Niha, though in a un-conciliatory, sometime even schizophrenic way.

Although there were many changes in social structures during colonial times and as a result of the independence of the Republic of Indonesia, the spirit of the autonomy of the *banua* is still very much alive. It challenges the church in three ways: 1. it is a permanent cause of conflict and schism in the congregations; 2. it maintains xenophobia and an exclusive attitude; and 3. it enhances the aspiration of forming regencies in accordance with *adat*-allegiances, and on a broader level, it gives fuel to the struggle for an autonomous province encompassing Nias and the Batu Islands.

#### 7.4.2 Poverty and Unemployment

As previously indicated<sup>597</sup>, since colonial times that Nias and the Batu Islands have been poorer areas of Indonesia.<sup>598</sup> Even today, the two Regencies of Nias have a very low per capita income, a very poor standard of educational and medical facilities, a chronic state of unemployment, and an underdeveloped infrastructure for traffic and communication.<sup>599</sup>

Generally, the official reason given for the poverty of the majority of Ono Niha is its isolated geography. Nias and the Batu Islands are situated far away from the economic, educational and political centres of the Indonesia. On the other hand, the national illness of corruption contributes significantly towards perpetuating the poverty on Nias.

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<sup>596</sup> Cf. T. Telaumbanua and U. Hummel, 'Inquiry', 2000.

<sup>597</sup> Cf. Ch. 6.5.

<sup>598</sup> Oberlin Batu Bara, 'Tipologi Kemiskinan Desa Ter-tinggal Nias', in: Mubyarto (ed.), *Profil Desa Tertinggal Indonesia*, 1994, p. 9.

<sup>599</sup> Cf. BPS Kabupaten Nias, *Produk Domestik Regional Bruto Kabupaten Nias 2002*, 2003, pp. 2-12., Cf. Panitia Seminar dan Lokakarya 2001, *Peranan Gereja dalam pembangunan Masyarakat Nias*, 2001, pp. 94-97.

In the Niasan diaspora on Sumatra and Java, a minority of Ono Niha have achieved a relatively good standard of living. Most others are peregrines who labour in plantations and factories, hardly earning enough to make a living.

#### 7.4.3 Pluralistic Society

Eka Darmaputera<sup>600</sup> points out that any contextual theology in Indonesia has to deal with the pluralistic nature of Indonesian society. Whereas previously every tribe's identity was defined as an independent entity, in the *Pancasila*-state there is a new modern identity, namely the national identity. This national identity consists of a great variety of tribes, races, cultures, and religions.<sup>601</sup> This multitude is united under one principle: *Bhineka Tunggal Ika* (unity in diversity).<sup>602</sup>

The diversity of Indonesian society is a source of great potential, but it can also cause conflicts. The history of Indonesia has often known phases of tribal and religious strife. Today, perhaps more than ever before, this has become a major challenge to the BNKP, as well as to most other churches in Indonesia.

#### 7.4.4 Impact of Globalisation

Although most Ono Niha still live in a very remote and isolated place, the impact of globalisation is bringing about great changes to their lives. Simply speaking, globalisation means a borderless world. In a more differentiated way, however, it forms a process of interrelations and interdependence between countries and societies in a variety of cross border activities.

There are seven categories of globalization. The first, is the monetary globalisation and the ownership of capital through the deregulation of the capital market, the mobility of international capital, mergers, and acquisitions. The second is the globalisation of the market and the economic strategy through the integration of business on an international scale, cooperated business-alliances in other countries, and in the financial sector. The third is the globalisation of science and technology through research and development. A fourth, category is the globalization of the style of life and the pattern of consumption, as well as culture. A further category is the globalisation of governmental regulations. Sixthly we have the globalisation of international politics. Finally, there is the globalization of the international socio-cultural perception.<sup>603</sup>

<sup>600</sup> Cf. E. Darmaputera, *Pancasila, Identitas dan Modernitas*, 1991, cf. Ch. 1.2.

<sup>601</sup> Cf. L. Suryadinata, *Penduduk Indonesia: Etnis dan Agama dalam Era Perubahan Politik*, 2003, pp. 1-138. Cf. H.J.W.M. Boelaars, *Indonesianisasi: Dari Gereja Katolik di Indonesia menjadi Gereja Katolik Indonesia*, 2005, pp 34-25. Boelaars noted that Indonesia consists of 6000 islands inhabited by more than 366 ethnic groups and about 250 vernacular tribes. From the 242 million population of Indonesia, the majority are Muslim (88, 22 %), and than follow by Protestants (6%), Catholics (2, 89 %), Buddhists (0, 84 %), Hindus (1, 81 %), and others (0, 20 %).

<sup>602</sup> Cf. F.L. Cooley, *Indonesia: Church and Society*, 1968, pp. 9-19. Cooley noted that Indonesia is made up of many diverse ethnic and language groups, which have been relatively isolated from one another until quite recently. This isolation resulted from the country's marked geographic traits: deep straits and wide seas separating islands, high volcanic mountain ranges, heavy tropical rain forest and wide swampy sea coasts. These have led to differences in history, regional development, traditions, customs and religion, which accentuate the difficulty of binding these diverse groups into a unified nation. Indonesia's present condition and her main problem are symbolized by the national motto: *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, Diversity becoming unity.

<sup>603</sup> Cf. Carunia M. Firdausy, *Tantangan dan Peluang Globalisasi bagi Perekonomian Nasional*, 2000,

Globalisation thus creates an ambiguity or a so-called 'global paradox' (John Naisbitt).<sup>604</sup> On the one hand, there is the tendency towards political independency or autonomy, whereas on the other hand there is the growing need for forming alliances. The more universal we get, the more 'tribal' our actions become. This is signified in the slogan: 'think global, act local'. The same is the case with language: while the need for global communication (e.g., by using English) increases, the affinity with the local vernacular becomes stronger as well.<sup>605</sup>

Robert J. Schreiter<sup>606</sup> points out the negative side of globalisation, particularly the growing gap between the rich and the poor. In a globalised free-market economy, those who have access to capital compete feverishly and try to scoop up as much wealth as possible. This, however, happens to the detriment of those who are not stakeholders in the economy, such as the peasants, the unskilled labourers, the unemployed, etc, who become poorer and poorer. The ugly side effects are also the destruction of the environment and an increase of violence.

Globalisation changes social traditions.<sup>607</sup> While an individual or a community might succeed in achieving a kind of a balance between universal and tribal values, the loss of a centre in life often leads to an identity crisis.

Facing this condition, some Indonesian theologians have begun to develop new patterns in answering the challenges of globalisation. E.G. Singgih<sup>608</sup> holds that contextualization forms an antithesis towards globalisation. This, however, does not mean that they are mutually exclusive. They rather have to be placed in a dialectical relation to each other. It is the task of missiology to grapple with the impacts of the global economy, the threats of ecological disasters, and the reality of pluralistic societies to proclaim the Kingdom of God in this very context.

## 7.5 GOSPEL AND CULTURE ON NIAS AND THE BATU ISLANDS

In 2004, all churches on Nias and the Batu Islands, including the Roman Catholic Church, were invited by the Communion of Churches on Nias (*PGI-Daerah Nias*) for a seminar on the encounter between Gospel and Niasan culture. The three day-long deliberations resulted in three major findings, namely:

1. The missionaries of the RM and the DLM, as well as the indigenous Protestant churches, on the one hand accommodated certain elements of pre-Christian culture (e.g., language and *adat*), while, on the other hand, they rejected and tried to destroy all other elements of culture, particularly those related to the

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pp. 3-4. Cf. Mary O'Hara – Devereaux and Robert Johansen, *Global Work: Menjembatani Jarak, Budaya dan Waktu*, 1995, pp. 1-65. Cf. The Group of Lisbon, *Limits to Competition*, 1995, p. 21.

<sup>604</sup> Cf. J. Naisbitt, *Global Paradox*, 1994, pp. 1-50.

<sup>605</sup> In countries such as Indonesia, Germany and the Netherlands which have national languages other than the 'international languages', such as English, French, Spanish and Chinese, every modern citizen should be fluent in at least his/her local language (e.g., *Li Nono Niha*, the Bavarian dialect, Friesian), the national language (e.g., BI), and one international language (e.g., English).

<sup>606</sup> Cf. R.J. Schreiter, 'Epilogue: Mission in the Third Millennium', in: R.J. Schreiter (ed.), *Mission in the Third Millennium*, n.d., pp. 150-152.

<sup>607</sup> I. Wibowo, 'Globalisasi dan Gereja (Indonesia)', in: J.B. Banawiratman (ed.), *Gereja Indonesia. Quo Vadis, Hidup Menggereja Kontekstual*, 2000, pp. 28-32.

<sup>608</sup> E.G. Singgih, 'Globalisasi dan Kontekstualisasi', in: N.L. Kana, (ed.), *Jurnal Politik Lokal dan Sosial-Humaniora*, 2002, pp. 38-49.

primal religion. This attitude resulted in a differentiation of the social reality, namely into the three clearly separated spheres of religion, *adat* and government. This paradigm of the fragmentation of reality, which replaced the traditional, holistic worldview, often caused a conflict of norms and values in everyday life.

2. Although the majority of the Ono Niha became Christians, the presence of the churches on Nias and the Batu Islands contributed little towards overcoming poverty. Charity and church programs on community development have not effectively improved the economy of the Ono Niha.
3. After the churches on Nias and the Batu Islands have for so long uncritically clung to the heritage of the missionary era, they now have to take a lead in facilitating research on the transformation of the Niasan culture and the development of contextual theology.<sup>609</sup> The above-mentioned results of the seminar indicate that the topic of Gospel and culture<sup>610</sup> (in the sense of contextualization), which has been rather neglected by the Niasan churches, has to be given urgent top-priority. The habit of blaming all problems on the 'old law' (*huku fõna*) and applying the church discipline (*amakhoita*) solely for the purpose of maintaining the status quo established in the missionary era, must be seriously questioned in the light of the Gospel. The goal must be that the culture of the Ono Niha be transformed by the Gospel in such a way that it can actually serve as a 'jar' for the 'treasure' of the power of God (2 Cor 4:7). It has to be taken into account, however, that the nature of any culture, including 'Christian culture', is 'infected with godlessness, which is the essence of sin'.<sup>611</sup> Therefore, the Christians' duty is not to be 'conformed to this world' (or be it the missionaries' heritage), but to be 'transformed' and 'renewed' in accordance with the will of God (Rom 12:2). Contextualization thus is a constant process of reformation.

In the Niasan churches, there is a growing appreciation for contextual theology. Some experiments have already been made to include elements of traditional Niasan culture in the liturgy. Contextual theology, however, cannot be limited to liturgical adjustments only, but has to enter every aspect or formulation of the faith-experience of the *Ono Niha Keriso*. This includes the understanding about God, salvation, the *banua*, church discipline, the ministries of the church, the role of women, and the problems of the values of the *adat*.

An extended discourse on these points would exceed the scope of the study, so that only three of them, concerning God, salvation, and the *banua*, are lifted out as entry-points towards the development of a contextual theology.

#### 7.5.1 God (Lowalangi)

As we have seen before<sup>612</sup>, Denninger chose the Niasan name Lowalangi for God. This has to be seen as an effort to adapt Christian theology to the local context. Although there has been a debate over this issue, until now Niasan Christians refer

<sup>609</sup> W. Gulö (ed.), 'Injil dan Budaya Nias: Laporan Seminar Lokakarya Perjumpaan Injil dan Budaya Nias di Gunungsitoli, Nias, 6-8 Maret 2004', 2004, pp. 1-19, 198-213.

<sup>610</sup> Cf. S.W. Ariarajah, *Gospel and Culture: An Ongoing within the Ecumenical Movement*, 1994.

<sup>611</sup> H.R. Niebuhr, *Christ & Culture*, 2001, p. 154.

<sup>612</sup> Cf. Ch. 2.4 and Ch. 4.3.2.3.

to the God of the Bible as Lowalangi.<sup>613</sup> However, the use of a term taken from the primal religion of the Ono Niha is not sufficient, if not accompanied by a dialogical process of the encounter of Gospel and culture in the life of the people. The missionaries took the name Lowalangi from the Ono Niha, filled it with their specific, western understanding of God, without taking into consideration that the Ono Niha had different associations concerning this name. For the Ono Niha there always have been and still are three basic patterns concerning the meaning of Lowalangi: Lowalangi as a source of blessings, Lowalangi as the source and custodian of the law (*adat* and *fondrakö*), and Lowalangi as the source of strength (*So'aya*<sup>614</sup>).

The BNKP has never discussed the meaning of Lowalangi historically and sociologically in an objective, let alone in an appreciative way. The result of this is that the pattern and the values which Ono Niha associate with Lowalangi, do not seem to be fully in accordance with the Bible. While the official, dogmatic teachings about God are a mere repetition of the version offered by the missionaries of old, the actual understanding of the Ono Niha seems to be very similar to the paradigm of the primal religion, only that it is fragmentised and torn out of its original setting. This seems to explain why the *Ono Niha Keriso* comprehend their Christian faith in a very legalistic way. Also, this may explain why they are enthusiastic about teachings resembling those of Ama Haogö concerning the acquisition of supernatural powers (while at the same time condemning Ama Haogö as a heretic), and why they secretly expect blessings from the spirits of the ancestors. The question has to be answered whether the authoritarian understanding of leadership, in the family, in the church and in society, relate back to the authoritarian understanding of Lowalangi.

In the effort to develop a contextual theology, the BNKP cannot be satisfied with the mere repetition of the inherited doctrine. The first step must be a careful analysis of the Ono Niha's current understanding of God. How does this relate to both the culture of the Ono Niha (including the former primal religion) and to the Bible? From here, in a creative, dialogical and systematic way, an understanding of Lowalangi as witnessed by the Bible can be developed. This method seems to be in accordance with the approach of St. Paul when proclaiming God to the people of Athens (Acts 17: 22-25). The Gospel can have its points of contact with the pre-Christian culture of a people.

Based on a new, both biblical and contextual understanding of God, the BNKP can then undertake the effort of reforming and re-formulating other aspects of its church life, such as its doctrine, liturgy, church order and discipline, and its mission these then can become manifest in its programs of service.<sup>615</sup>

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<sup>613</sup> Ono Niha who converted to Islam also used Lowalangi, both in every day language and when referring to their religious teachings. However, in the *khutbah* (Islamic sermon) on Friday, the name *Allah* is used. The leader of the Nahdatul Ulama (a Muslim organisation) on Nias declared that the terms Lowalangi and *Allah* have the same meaning. Cf. Interview with Ali Amran Tanjung on 30 November 2005.

<sup>614</sup> The literal meaning of *soaya* is 'the one using a magic necklace of honour'. This term was taken over by the missionaries as the equivalent for 'LORD'.

<sup>615</sup> The present program of the BNKP, named *Program Umum Pelayanan BNKP* (PUPB), covers all the services such as witness (*marturia*), education (*didaskalia*), fellowship (*koinonia*), charity (*diakonia*), and economy (*oikonomia*).

### 7.5.2 Salvation (*Fangorifi*)

Besides clearing the understanding about Lowalangi, salvation (*fangorifi*) is a major theme in the discussion about the encounter between Gospel and culture and in developing a contextual theology. The concept of salvation very much determines the essence of a particular religion, the relationship to God and one's neighbours, and the actions of its believers.

What do present-day *Ono Niha Keriso* mean by salvation? According to the *Inquiry 2000*, there are three outstanding answers to this question:

1. Eternal life in heaven.
2. Blessings in the daily life.
3. Liberation from the bonds of sin.

From the investigation of the backgrounds of these answers, it seems obvious that these concepts of salvation are constructed from both Christian and primal religious elements. The theological textbooks, inherited from the missionaries and still in use, emphasize the salvation of the soul in the life hereafter<sup>616</sup>, as well as redemption from sin, death and the power of the devil.<sup>617</sup> The influence of the primal religion is evident in the daily life of the *Ono Niha*, both in the hope for earthly blessings (*howuhowu*) and in the fear of being cursed (*fangelifi*).<sup>618</sup>

Does this understanding of salvation, explain the present tendency among Niasan Christians towards piety (*praxis pietatis*), which is advocated by the charismatic movement. Do Niasan Christians engage in good works because they love Lowalangi, or because they expect blessings in return? Are they a pattern taken over by Christianity from the *adat*? On the other hand, Niasan Christians may also fear some kind of curse, if they do not fulfill their Christian 'duties', similar to *adat*-duties. These include attending the worship service on Sunday, and the morning and evening devotions with their families. Does this eschatological approach explain why Niasan Christians do not like the religious authorities to speak about politics, let alone demand justice and respect for human rights? Can this paradigm concerning salvation possibly enable Niasan Christians to face the challenges of pluralism and globalization?

These questions and challenges have to be dealt with seriously by the BNKP. There has to be critical dialogue, considering both the Bible as foundation of the Christian faith and the contemporary struggle of the *Ono Niha*. According to the author, is the duty of the Niasan church to re-formulate its concept of salvation by concentrating on four points:

1. Salvation is the work and grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. This draws on the Biblical teaching that salvation (which includes reconciliation) cannot be obtained through human efforts or through rituals. Only by the love of God can this world be saved (Jn 3:16).
2. Salvation is possible only by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ who died on the cross (Rom 5:8-11; 2 Cor 5:18-21; Eph 2:11-12; Col 1:19-22). This central truth of Christian faith had indeed played an important role in the teachings of

<sup>616</sup> Cf. C. Ernst, *Famahaö ba lala Wangorifi*, 1892/1993, pp. 3-4.

<sup>617</sup> Cf. A. Lück, *Katechismus Luther*, 1934/1984, pp. 121-124.

<sup>618</sup> Cf. Ch. 2.4.2 and Ch. 6.2.1.3.2.

the missionaries of old<sup>619</sup>, and right up to the official dogmatics of the *pandita* of the BNKP. This point has, however, not been properly understood by the majority of Niasan Christians because the BNKP failed to use the corresponding categories of the primal religion<sup>620</sup>, emphasizing that the sacrifice of Christ has no points of contact in 'heathen' culture.

3. Salvation comes through the Good News to the whole creation (Mk 16:15). According to the traditional cosmology of the Ono Niha, reconciliation was not only between humans and between humans and the ancestral spirits, but also between human beings and nature. All reconciliatory rituals and ceremonies were aimed at restoring harmony and integrity to the cosmos. By condemning the whole of the primal religion, and failing to raise awareness of the holistic nature of salvation as expressed in the Bible, it is now very difficult to raise awareness among the Niasan Christians of the need to take responsibility for the integrity of Gods creation.
4. Salvation is the liberation from the powers of evil and oppression in this world (Lk 4:16-21). The primal religion of the Ono Niha had no mercy for the poor and powerless. They were treated as sub-human, used as slaves, killed in sacrifice, and sold to strangers. Strangely, though the missionaries condemned this tradition and accomplished much in their combat against slavery and in their struggle to raise the dignity of women and children, they have failed to build up a viable church service for overcoming poverty and empowering the marginalized in Niasan society. Could it be that the presently weak diaconal structures and services result from a complete lack of the biblical awareness that God cares for and liberates the poor? Can the missing sense of justice for the underprivileged, and the obsession by most ministers and elders to side with the strong and mighty (even if they are corrupt) be explained by the uncritical adoption of the paradigm of the primal religion by Christianity? This is not the place to answer all of these questions. The author is of the opinion that a contextual theology for Nias has to position itself clearly on the side of the less fortunate, 'the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the naked and the prisoners' (Mt 25:35-45).

### 7.5.3 Community and Church (*Banua ba Banua Niha Keriso*)

The term *banua*, which was traditionally used for the village-community, was taken over by both the RM and the DLM for the churches on Nias and the Batu Islands respectively.<sup>621</sup> Taking over this pre-Christian terminology seems to have been an effort towards indigenisation which can be compared with, for example, the term *tongkonan* in the Toraja Church.<sup>622</sup> But, it has to be asked critically, is it enough to use an indigenous term in developing a contextual ecclesiology?

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<sup>619</sup> Cf. Ch. 4.3.3.

<sup>620</sup> Cf. Ch. 2.4.3.2 (*famatō harimao*); see also Ch. 4.3.2.2 and Ch. 5.4.3 (i.e., the 'Abrahamic sacrifice' of Tanjung Saeru on Tanah Masa).

<sup>621</sup> The church on Nias was called *Banua Niha Keriso Protestan* (BNKP) and the church on the Batu Islands was called *Banua Keriso Protestan* (BKP), cf. Ch. 5.3.1 and Ch. 5.7.1.

<sup>622</sup> The *Gereja Toraja* (GT) on Sulawesi has come forth from the missionary work of the Dutch-Reformed Gereformeerde Zendingsbond (GZB). The meaning of *tongkonan* is 'fellowship', the 'traditional house' and the 'ancestral house', cf. Th. Kobong, *Evangelium und Tongkonan*, 1989, pp. 290-296.

It has been mentioned that in post-colonial times, the BNKP suffered from continuous conflicts and schisms. One of the roots of these problems is that the term *banua* was adopted by the missionaries, severed from its original context, and simply applied to their specific western understanding of the church. There had been no appreciation of the original context, nor had there been a serious dialogue with the Ono Niha. The missionaries built a kind of a 'meta-*banua*' in accordance with the classic presbyterial-synodal model combined with an almost Episcopal, centralistic element (i.e., the *ephorus*). In this structure there was no room for the autonomy of the local community (i.e., the congregation), as is the case in the traditional *banua*. In the church with the new *banua*, there was no more need for the *adat*; on the other hand the original *adat*-community was torn apart by dividing it into Christians (*Niha Keriso*) and outsiders (*Niha baero*). As a result, there had been no transformation of the original concept of the *banua* and no application of it to the Ono Niha's own understanding of the biblical ecclesia.

Nevertheless, the Ono Niha, after embracing Christianity, did not lose their traditional values. What happened was that the Ono Niha associated the spirit, the patterns and the values of the traditional *banua* with the term *Banua Niha Keriso*. Today, the Christians are confronted with yet other values, namely those of modernisation and globalisation. Since their Christianity has the unhealthy, dualistic character of acknowledging the inherited teachings of the missionaries on the one hand and clinging to *adat*-values disguised as Christianity on the other hand, the encounter with modernisation and globalisation either causes staunch conservatism or weakens the values, resulting in careless relativism.

The BNKP, and other Niasan churches, are now called to enter into a discussion about their ecclesiology. The aim should be to form the 'new *banua*' in such a way that it becomes a strong communion of believers and a holy, catholic church which bears witness to Jesus Christ as its head and its sole foundation. The challenge will be to do this without losing the specific cultural identity of the Ono Niha. In fact, the objective should be to transform Niasan culture into becoming a genuine Christian culture. Theodorus Kobong did just that for the Toraja Church. He developed a contextual ecclesiology based on the traditional concept of the clan-house or *tongkonang*. The traditional concept must be transformed to be a contextual model for the church. He called this: 'The church as the new *tongkonan*'.<sup>623</sup> Kobong's model, however, focuses only on the traditional culture and does not deal sufficiently with contemporary social-cultural factors, such as pluralism and globalisation. These therefore have to be further developed to meet the challenges of the present-day.

To conceptualise the 'new *banua*' in a Niasan contextual theology seven principles should be taken into consideration:

1. The *Banua Niha Keriso* does not come into existence because of the efforts of its members to fulfil all the demands of the *adat*, such as is the case in the traditional *banua*. To the contrary, the Christian *banua* is a communion of people who have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ (I Cor 3:11; Eph 2:15-22; Rom 6:1-14; etc.) Therefore, the old paradigm of the *banua*, in which extraordinary efforts were aimed at increasing the honour (*lakhömi*) of

<sup>623</sup> 'Die Kirche als neue Tongkonan', cf. Th. Kobong, *Evangelium und Tongkonan*, 1989, pp. 290-296.

the human being, has to be transformed. Good deeds should come forth as a token of gratitude for God's free grace.

2. The head of the 'new banua' is no longer the chief (*salawa* or *balö si'ulu*), nor the *pandita* or even the *ephorus*. Rather, Christ himself, is the head (Eph 1:22-23). As the head of the church, Christ loves all the members of his body (Jn 10:11 and 15:13). Although he is the head, he did not considerer it beneath his honour to 'empty himself, taking the form of a slave ...' (Phil 2:7). Therefore, all leaders in the 'new banua' should likewise be willing to serve 'like a slave' of God. This is quite a challenge, since, until now, most ministers and elders in the BNKP consider themselves just like the paramount chiefs of the old traditional *banua* and claim the same *lakhömi* from the members of the congregations.
3. The 'new *banua*' is neither restricted to blood relationships nor the land owned by ancestors. Also, there is no stratification between nobility and commoners. In the contrary, the new *banua* is open to every person equally as members of the body of Christ. (I Cor 12:12-31; Gal 3:28). All members of the congregation are sisters and brothers in Christ. Therefore, the BNKP must be liberated from its exclusive, ethnic character. The equality of all its members and the openness to strangers must be a fundamental characteristic of a new contextual Niasan ecclesiology.
4. The 'new *banua*' is sent by God into this world to bring the Good News of reconciliation to all of creation. Wherever the *Banua Niha Keriso* manifests itself, be it on Nias and the Batu Islands, or in the diaspora on Sumatra and Java, the encounter between Gospel and culture takes place. If, however, as so often is the case, the church keeps a clear distance from everything considered worldly, how then can the world know its Saviour? Therefore, the BNKP has to be a missionary church which seeks lost sheep wherever they have strayed. Only by entering those fields which, in accordance with the teachings of the missionaries of old, have been stigmatised as being worldly (e.g., politics, economy), can the church effectively contribute towards the transformation of the world.
5. The *Banua Niha Keriso* is a 'triumphal procession' in this world spreading the word of Christ (2 Cor 2: 14-15; Heb 12:1). This procession is on towards the fulfilled life in the Kingdom of God; the church is the community of the future. The BNKP, however, is often turned backwards. The ideal is the primeval village, the *banua furi*, the dwelling place of the ancestors. The theological challenge should be to develop an understanding of Biblical eschatology which accommodates the ancestors. Could it be the vision of all Ono Niha, including the ancestors, to be re-united in eternity, joined by all other nations at the great *owasa*, a pork-banquet in the Kingdom of God?
6. The *Banua Niha Keriso* meets other faith-based communities in this world. This is especially the case in the urban areas and in the diaspora, where the context is increasingly pluralistic. Therefore, the ecclesiology of the BNKP should be inclusive rather than exclusive. The challenge will be to bring together the concept of the *banua* as a cosmos (an integrated whole) and a multicultural communication and inter-religious dialogue.
7. In a rapidly changing world, it is the churches' duty to give ethical and moral orientation. In pre-Christian times, the mechanism for the renewal of the *adat* was the *fondrakö* (or the *famatö harimao*) enacted by the chiefs and

sanctioned by the priests (*ere*). In modern times, this institution cannot be revived. Reorientation for meeting new challenges, however, is as necessary as ever. Based on the Bible, the churches may not hesitate to seek new perspectives for the community. Without claiming authority in the realms of *adat* and government, the church has to be 'the salt of the earth' and the 'light of the world' (Mt 5:13-14). Therefore, the church has to act as an ambassador of the Kingdom of God, demanding its norms and values to be applied in all spheres of life. This entails matters such as justice, liberation from bondage, peace, integrity of creation and prosperity for all humankind. A Niasan contextual theology therefore may neither be limited to the ethnic parameters of the Ono Niha, nor to the boundaries of church denominations, but has to be truly ecumenical and open itself to interreligious and intercultural encounters.<sup>624</sup>

## 7.6 FINAL OBSERVATIONS

The Niasan Churches, similar to other tribal churches in Indonesia, need renewal or transformation. They have to review their concepts about the essence of the church and its mission. The history of the BNKP shows that it is counterproductive to continue the Western theology inherited from the European missionaries and their Niasan protégés. Not only have the needs changed, but also has the disparaging approach of the church towards everything considered worldly, including traditional and contemporary culture, politics and matters relating to the economy, limits the impact of the Gospel on society.

Developing contextual theologies is a necessity for all churches. A church that is not deeply rooted in the culture of the community in which it exists can neither solve its problems nor give guidance amidst rapid change. Only a church that is present in all spheres of life, both public and private, can be an effective witness to God's Kingdom. It is the church's task to save and to renew life. Therefore, since culture is the highest expression of human life, the church should embrace and nurture culture without neglecting its critical analysis and prophetic demand for justice and truth.

Lastly, stimulated by the impact of globalization, a new sense for indigenous culture has arisen in the BNKP. It is important that this does not end up in nostalgia or romanticizing traditional Ono Niha culture. Rather through an intensive learning process the church must redefine and renew its identity, if it is to serve the community more effectively and render a distinctive service within the ecumenical movement. The goal of a contextual theology for Nias should be to proclaim the Gospel to the 'whole creation' (Mk 16:15). The old paradigm, inherited from the missionaries, one-sidedly emphasized the 'salvation of the soul'. The new paradigm should return to a holistic view of salvation including liberation from evil in this world that results in justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.

A heavy but also inspiring task lies ahead for the Niasan Churches. They must work on the transformation of the vision concerning the church's mission and

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<sup>624</sup> Cf. D. J. Elwood, 'Teologi Kristen Asia dalam Proses Penjadiannya: Pengantar', in: Douglas J. Elwood (ed), *Teologi Kristen Asia: Tema-tema yang Tampil ke Permukaan*, 1993, pp. xx-xl. Cf. V. Küster, *Die vielen Gesichter Jesu Christi*, 1999, pp. 85-147.

ecclesiastical. The BNKP has to enter an intensive process of studying of the Bible, the different doctrinal traditions, and the local contexts in which they operate. This may result in contextual liturgies, hymnals, textbooks, church discipline, and a more relevant church order. The church will then be in a position to play a more significant role in transforming society.