

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PROTESTANT CHURCH IN INDONESIA

The oldest Protestant church in Southeast Asia is probably the Protestant Church in Indonesia, the Geredja Protestant Indonesia (GPI) which observed its 374th anniversary last February 27, 1979. It is almost 300 years older than the Protestant Church in the Philippines.

The late Dr. Hendrik Kramer was of the opinion that the Church starts to exist at the very moment there are believers in Jesus' words: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." (Matthew 18:20).

Based on this principle, the Protestant Church in Indonesia was born on February 27, 1605, for on that day for the first time on Indonesian soil a divine service was held according to the rites of the Protestant Church in a former Portuguese fortress in the town of Ambon which had just been conquered by the Dutch.

At that time the island of Ambon, especially the peninsula of Leitimor, the Lease Archipelago, Oma (Haruku), Honimoa (Saparua), and Nusalaut were in Portuguese hands. The Portuguese had built a rather strong fortress on the coast of Leitimor in the town of Ambon, where now stand the ruins of the Dutch fortress Nieuw Victoria. The Portuguese fortress was armed with thirty cannons and garrisoned with 600 men. In its surroundings were hundreds of Indonesian Roman Catholics and forty-five Portuguese families.

The Dutch Admiral Steven van der Hagen arrived at the beautiful Bay of Ambon on February 21, 1605 with a fleet of nine ships. He was assisted in the fight against the Portuguese by the people of Hitu under the leadership of Captain Hitu Tapel of Banteh who supplied twenty armed *kora-koras*.

The Portuguese commander Gaspar de Mello surrendered on February 23rd, on the condition that the 600 Portuguese soldiers be allowed to leave with their arms and that the Portuguese families be allowed to stay in Ambon and to practice their religion. Admiral van der Hagen granted the terms requested by the Portuguese, but required the Catholic Portuguese families to swear loyalty to the Dutch government.

Then on February 27th, the first service was held according to the Protestant rites in one of the four churches round the fortress, attended by the Dutch, some tens of Indonesians (Amboines) and a few Portuguese.

With the conquest of Ambon, several hundred of Portuguese, twenty-three sovereigns and chieftains of Leitimor and Lease, including 16,000 of their subjects became Dutch subjects. The Hitu people who had assisted the Dutch, became their allies.

The first problem of the Protestant Church at the time of its establishment was lack of ministers to look after the spiritual welfare of more than 16,000 people who had earlier embraced the Roman Catholic religion but who were now deserted by their priests who had gone either to Manila or Goa without any successor.

In 1607, Admiral Cornelis Materlief visited Ambon for an inspection. The Dutch Governor Frederick de Houtman (1605-1611) summoned all the sovereigns. Admiral Matelief asked them what their wishes were and the sovereigns answered that they had two requests to make: 1) to send ministers as soon as possible and 2) to allow the Dutch men to marry Indonesian women as had been the case with the Portuguese, too. Matelief granted the request immediately, but asked

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only once a year. It flew only during the darkest night so that its brightness could be seen all over the places where it went. It was always a non-stop flight from Madyaas and back. Bululakaw never alighted anywhere except on Mount Madyaas.

So in those days, Panay which was earlier named Aninipay, was considered the land of blessings. It was believed, therefore, by the old folks of Laglag based on the story of Bululakaw handed down from generation to generation that the people of Southeast Asia made pilgrimages to Madyaas, to worship Bululakaw. The people of Laglag were of the opinion that because Bululakaw dwelt in Madyaas, Panay was already known to the Malayan people of Southeast Asia even long before Datu Puti and his group left Borneo because of the tyranny of Sultan Makatunao.

It was the belief of these old folks, including Negrito leader Tan Martin, Ati Goyang and Elder Tiago, that when the Bornean *datus* landed in Panay in the early 13th century, it was not by accident.

A brief history of the . . .

them to be a little patient with regards to the coming of the ministers since they had to come from Holland. When the Admiral and Governor de Houtman returned to the Netherlands, each of them took a few young Indonesians with them to be trained as religious teachers.

The first parishes were Ambon and Lease, followed by Ternate, Djakarta and Banda, in the years from 1605 to 1622. Now there are parishes found in Sumatra, Java, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, (Celebes), Jusa Tenggara, Maluku (Moluccas), and West Irian.

The widely scattered parishes in the Indonesian archipelago are organized into independent churches within the alliance of the Geredja Protestant Indonesia (GPI); Geredja Masehi Injili

They already knew where Panay was and were familiar with its geography because some of them, like the *padi* Bangotbanwa, a deeply religious man, had been to Madyaas before to worship Bululakaw. The migrating Borneans really intended to come to Panay when they left Borneo because they wanted to be near the dwelling place of Bululakaw whose blessings they must have prayed for on their quest for peace and freedom.

The belief in Bululakaw as a god is now gone in the Philippines. As I said at the beginning of this article, it is now only regarded as a mythical bird. But tales about Bululakaw still abound especially among the people in the interior towns of Panay. There are also several places in Panay, Mindoro and other islands that are named Bululakaw, perhaps in memory of the once adored god-bird.

I wonder if there are traces of belief in Bululakaw that are still found in other places in Southeast Asia, especially in Borneo. If there are, then Bululakaw was indeed a Southaest Asian deity,

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Minahasa (GMIM), 1934; Geredja Protestant Maluku (GPM), 1935; Geredja Masehi Injili (GMIT), 1947; and Geredja Protestant West Indonesia (GPIB), 1948.

Since 1964, the missionary parishes in Central Suluwesi and Gorontalo have been organized in three separate churches within the sphere of GPI. These are the Geredja Protestant Indonesia at Gorontalo, at Buol Toli-Toli, and at Palu Donggala.

The parishes and members of the aforementioned seven churches are automatically also the parishes and members of the Protestant Church in Indonesia which is the oldest and one of the largest Protestant Churches in Southeast Asia, with more than 1,800,000 members.