

Book Review – The Mango Tree Church

Dear Folks,

Ed and Marie have left Bali and are on their way to Australia. This week's THTH is Ed's review of this book about the history of the church in Bali and next week will be some of his thoughts about that church after three months in its midst.

Peace,
Robin

Douglas G. McKenzie (in association with bishop I Wayan Mastra)

THE MANGO TREE CHURCH.

THE STORY OF THE PROTESTANT CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN BALI.

Moorooka, Queensland, Australia: Boolarong Press. 1988 (Updated reprint 1997).

Kipling's couplet, "East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet," is no longer true, says author McKenzie. If nothing else, cyberspace and global economy have rendered it passé here at the end of the 20th century. Bali is a prime example, where international tourism, mostly from the West, has become THE industry of this tiny island (as large as the state of Delaware in the USA). Thousands of tourists arrive each day, and on average each one leaves US\$5K behind upon their departure. The twain are indeed meeting and money is passing from one to the other. And with money comes the money's culture—willy-nilly.

[Romantic Westerners even come here, not just for honeymoons, but to meet the East by having their wedding “in Balinese style.” A week ago Saturday one such wedding took place in “my” church in Legian—50 people from both families having flown in from Australia for the event. There is now a “Bali weddings” industry. Item: this very week I was asked to dedicate (with Christian liturgy) the new office of Raja Weddings International, owned and operated by one of the elders in our congregation!]

But is Kipling’s quip still valid for the Protestant Christian Church in Bali, officially Gereja Kristen Protestan di Bali [hereafter GKPB]? Well, yes and no. Yes, if you read the minutes of the “watershed” synod of 1974. Here the GKPB made policy decisions NOT to be a “western” European church [shaped by Dutch missionaries], but a “Mango Tree Church,” a church of the Gospel planted in Balinese cultural soil, a church of the East, not the West.

Yes, if you look at the architecture of churches built since that GKPB – 74 synod meeting. You see that especially in the now classic building in Blimbingsari, the mother church of the GKPB. It takes Balinese Hindu temple architecture and puts it under the sign of the cross. Or again at the most recent one in Bukit Doa (Hill of Prayer) in Nusa Dua, suburban Denpasar. Here the government initially offered space for five buildings side by side, one each for the five recognized religions of Indonesia. So there they stand: Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Catholic and Protestant. Yes, hereabouts the last two are understood to be two different religions. The Protestant building may someday be hard to distinguish from the Hindu temple under construction next door, when that one is finished. The bell tower, donated by German Christians, does inform newcomers that something “other” than Hindu is here.

And yes, the GKPB is “east” when you see and hear the liturgical dance, the visual arts—painting, sculpture, shadow puppets—and the gamelan music that are now at home in the church’s life.

But then there’s the other side, the side where East and West have met—and even merged—in the GKPB. Example: In my English-language congregation the worship tradition I stepped into was straight out of American fundamentalism. [I’m a stranger at times on Sunday mornings, not because what’s going on is Balinese, but Bible-belt.] The same is true of the weekly Wednesday “prayer meetings” we have. And even in the Indonesian-language congregation meeting in the same building, as far as I can tell, the ethos of European pietism (e.g., the songs, the 4-times a year celebration of the Holy Communion, etc.)— the “colonial theology,” as John Titaley called it—shapes congregational faith and life.

And apropos those recent gems of Balinese church architecture, not one of them would have happened without massive infusions of western money—much of it from Australia and Germany. In fact, the Nusa Dua structure, we heard, was actually bank-rolled by the German government, possibly because of its quasi-official status as a cultural artifact initiated by the Indonesian government.

The GKPB also continues to meet the West in funding its widespread ministries in economic development and education in Bali. This in no way minimizes the heroic hard work of GKPB people in these efforts. Even finding such resources signals their Balinese entrepreneurial pragmatism. Yet without this “meeting the west” it’s hard to imagine how the marvel of Balinese church architecture as well as their large-scale economic/educational ventures, could have come to pass. For the GKPB is not a mega church. Its numbers (1999) are modest: 62 congregations, 45 pastors, and 8000 members.

Though “the West” has helped the GKPB put these artifacts in place, they are now embedded in the church’s “eastern” mission strategy. The church buildings seek to invite the Hindu outsider to look inside, to listen to the Christian Gospel as not totally alien to the world of Bali. And the economic and educational services are offered to the populace at large as “what Christ urges us to do,” with no religion test required for the receivers.

So how did this all come about? McKenzie tells the story. The GKPB’s history is not all that long. The first baptisms happened in 1931 (not far from where we’ve been living these three months). That’s not yet 70 years ago. Dutch colonial policy didn’t want Christian missions in Bali, intending, some say, to preserve this island’s unique Hindu-rooted, Buddhist-blended, animist, and ancestor-reverent culture. Mission work among the Chinese here was tolerated, but Balinese Hindus were off limits. And when, no surprise, some Balinese Hindus became Christ’s followers, and the word got back to the authorities, the missionaries were evicted. But the seed was planted, even if it came in a Dutch package, and again—no surprise—it grew.

Bishop Mastra was born in that year of the first baptisms, born into a Hindu family in the village of Sibetan in eastern Bali. McKenzie chronicles Mastra’s own remarkable journey into the Christian church. And when Mastra enters the narrative, the GKPB’s history and his own biography become warp and woof of the author’s weaving. It’s not that there were no others whom Christ used to build his church here. McKenzie tells us who the significant others are, but we don’t get to know them well. Granted, there is only One Who is The Cornerstone to the church—also in Bali. Yet Mastra appears without doubt to be the prime architect for the GKPB’s foundations built on that stone.

That was especially so at that “watershed synod” at Abianbase in

1972. Freshly returned from the USA with a doctor's degree the year before, "he was welcomed with open arms," McKenzie writes. He chaired the meeting at the synod and the program he advocated became church policy from that point on.

The synod said that it was "finally time to erase" the culture-denying legacy and westernization left them by the missionaries, time to wipe out the Dutch colonial influence. That meant a sea change in the church's self-image, as well as its imagination. They were no longer to be "a bonsai church, potted in an artificial context," but a "mango tree church," the product of the Gospel planted in Balinese cultural soil.

Mastra makes much of the mango tree image. Although the mango tree is highly visible, he explains, it adapts itself in a way that blends in with its rich, green, tropical environment. It provides welcome shade in a hot climate and produces refreshing fruit. He links the mango tree church with "the tree of life" at the end of the Book of Revelations, "yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations." In McKenzie's words "Mastra's matching vision is to see the GKPB become a new spiritual center for the life of the Balinese people. From this spiritual center he sees streams of living water flowing – satisfying streams of God's mercy, love and grace . . . perpetually bearing fruit to satisfy the deepest hunger of those who search for life's meaning. As the leaves of the scriptural tree were for the healing of the nations, Mastra sees the GKPB as a living sign of God's power to reconcile and to heal." (p.x)

When that vision got to the Watershed Synod, the minutes record the following:

"The GKPB has adopted a NEW POLICY of addressing the issues of Christian mission in Bali.

It resolves to formulate a program for building a cultural and training centre in Den Pasar, called Dhyana Pura (Temple or Place of Meditation) with the following goals:

- a. to seek to proclaim and live the Gospel of Jesus Christ in ways relevant to the Balinese people.*
- b. to help Balinese Christians gain a greater appreciation of their cultural heritage within the context of the faith, and to find new ways of expressing that faith within the culture.*
- c. to stimulate greater use of the Balinese architecture and cultural symbols in expressing the Christian faith within Balinese culture."*

Then came resolutions laying out the church's economic and educational proposals for following such a calling in Bali. Theological undergirding for the whole package was a commitment (using the New Testament Greek words) to *martyria* (witness), *koinonia* (fellowship) and *diakonia* (service). Curious to me is that the "witness" word, as McKenzie reports it, gets linked to the church's "extensive educational system, seeking to produce students of a high calibre, able to progress and obtain tertiary level (=university) degrees."

There is no reference here, no proposed strategy, for mission or evangelism to the people enjoying the shade and the fruit of the mango tree church.

The "fellowship" accent is in-house focusing on "forming its own identity, striving for self-determination in theology, and for building up of the body of Christ." The commitment to "service" is articulated as "stomach theology," meeting people's material needs and the vast enterprise of the church's development and social ministry agency, the MBM. [=Maha Bhoga Marga, literally, the path to sufficient food]. I twitch when McKenzie articulates

the MBM's "mandate to stress the Christian concept of stewardship," namely, "the small business management principles outlined in the Biblical book of Nehemiah, a story found to be in complete accord with modern methods." And even more so when he commends MBM because it "emphasizes biblical principles of prosperity." He does not pause to ask how such prosperity theology connects to Christ the suffering servant.