

Ketut Lasia–Balinese Christian, Balinese artist

Colleagues,

Christians are 1% of the population of Bali. That's 30K of 3 million. In that "little flock" we've come to know two artists, Ketut Lasia and Nyoman Darsane. These superb craftsmen do their daily work "crossing" Balinese painting and sculpture with the Christian Gospel. One of Lasia's bas reliefs welcomes worshippers at "our" church here in Legian. Both have already exhibited in Europe. Friends of ours in Germany know their work. Marie and I have seen their names and photos of their work in IMAGE magazine, the journal of the Asian Christian Artists Association. But they are unknown—as far as we know—in the USA. That's quite likely also true for many of you elsewhere on the planet who receive this posting. So here's an introduction—and a pitch!

The INTRODUCTION is Ketut Lasia's own life story below. The text is my translation from a German book about his work, "Christus auf Bali" [Christ on Bali] expanded a bit from conversations with him in his home here. He's seen our version and approves.

Now the PITCH. Colleagues of ours in the English-language congregations here are offering Christmas cards featuring the art of Lasia along with two other Bali artists. We've seen color proofs and they are stunning. There are four designs:

1. The Flight to Egypt and
2. a Nativity by Lasia himself,
3. the Holy Family in the midst of young children by Ketut's son Wahyu Lasia, and
4. the Visit of the Wise Men by Josef Darsane, son of Nyoman

Darsane mentioned above.

The price is US\$5 for 12 cards—3 each of the 4 designs—with envelopes. Logistics and additional costs for getting them from here to wherever you are still have to be worked out. Should you wish to order some, you can do so, using this email address: <104570.1455@compuserve.com> Start your message: “Hi, Renske” She’s the contact for international distribution. Tell her we spilled the beans.

Now to Ketut Lasia’s story—

“My name is Ketut Lasia. I was born on March 3, 1945 as the youngest son in a Hindu family in Peliatan, close to Ubud, the village of artists on the island of Bali in Indonesia.

“My parents were no painters. They were simple rice-farmers. Their life’s work consisted in growing rice, the daily food needed for us children. In my childhood I went to primary school, but no further. My parents were too poor to provide for any further education for me and my siblings. As a child I often went to the painters in our village. I watched them for hours and was amazed at the way they could take the images and pictures in their minds and turn them into paintings. I wanted to be a painter too.

“After finishing primary school – I was 12 years old – I worked with my parents on the family farm. I was not happy as a farmer, and I tried to enter other fields, including the police force. But none of my attempts worked out. At age 18 I left the family and moved to the home of a painter in our village. His name was Wayan Turun. I stayed with this master for about 5 years and learned from him how to do Balinese paintings.

“Wayan had many friends who were Christians. When he was together with them, I often sat in the corner doing my painting, and so listened [eavesdropped] as they spoke about the Bible.

But I was still too young, understood hardly anything of their conversations, and didn't join in. Not until later, when I myself had become a Christian, did I grasp that the Christians wanted to convert my teacher.

"When Wayan Turun graduated me from my apprenticeship with him I began to work on my own. Over and over again religious questions kept bothering me. I wrestled with what I had heard from the Christians. I was uncertain and felt that I needed solid ground in my life, some sort of affirmation.

"But, of course, I was a Hindu. In my religion that did not exist. There was no faith in any rescue or healing for humankind in Hinduism. In my religion the law of Karma ruled. Karma is the belief that every human action produces its own fruits –and there are no exceptions. Grace, mercy, forgiveness were unknown.

"After two or three years – I don't remember any more exactly – I met a Dutch pastor. His name was Visch and he bought one of my paintings. One day I decided to visit him in Denpasar (25 miles away) to talk with him about my questions and problems. After our conversation he gave me a small pamphlet that had a picture of the "lost son" (Luke 15:11-32) [known in English piety as the 'prodigal' son]. Many times I looked at it and discovered that for Christians there is always hope for forgiveness. Although all of us are sinners, we are forgiven. We are not judged according to our actions, when we confess our sins and repent.

"When I comprehended that, I heard for the first time God's call to me. That was in 1967. I began to get serious about the Christian faith and went to visit Pastor Visch again. In this encounter he gave me a Bible in Indonesian language. He told me to come to him any time if, while I was reading the Bible, something came up that I didn't understand.

"Of course, there were Biblical stories that gave me trouble. I

remember, for example, that the report of Jesus washing his disciples' feet (John 13) was incomprehensible to me. I saw that as humiliation and couldn't imagine such a renowned master teacher as Jesus doing such lowly service. In Hinduism such an action is unthinkable. But with time I was able to see that Jesus is giving his disciples an example here. I was able to apply this story to myself and sensed a growing wish that I wanted to follow Jesus.

"Thus one day I went to a Balinese pastor to take catechism instruction. That brought me a lot of trouble. My family and the village neighbors didn't understand that I wanted to become a Christian. They began to hate me and to exclude me. Before long I was completely isolated. Nevertheless I didn't let their reaction frighten me and I held fast to my intention. I wanted to press on to the truth. Marvelous to me was the fact that I was unable to get angry with these neighbors. I continued to love them, although they despised me. In 1968 I asked for baptism.

"My friends could not understand. They wanted me to join in their gambling games, but I told them as a Christian I was not allowed to gamble. Nor could I join them in the Hindu village temple celebrations.

"Thereafter I asked myself what I as a painter might do to honor God and to proclaim the Gospel. For pastors or teachers that seemed simple: they could preach or tell of the life of Jesus, but what could I as a painter do? I really didn't know how I could place my gift into God's service.

"But then I remembered a word in the Bible. There we hear that all of us have different gifts, and all can be used to honor God's name. That means for me as a painter that I could try to paint Biblical stories, in the same way that I had previously

painted Balinese scenes. As I started doing that I discovered how exciting that was. Every day I read something in the Bible, learned the report by heart and then painted individual scenes exactly as I imagined them happening. I transferred Biblical events into the Balinese context, as though Jesus had lived and taught here. The people acting in the Biblical stories I painted as Balinese men and women in the typical Balinese environment. While doing so I retained the Balinese 'ornamental' style of painting that is so normal and natural to the people here. In this way painting became my means for telling of Jesus and proclaiming the Good News.

"This did not all happen without consequences—painful consequences—within my family, within my village. Though my mother loved me to the end, when my father died he was still angry and rejecting. In the face of such opposition I had to leave my village and move to the city. I continue to visit the village, though, and am always friendly even if they reject me. We are told as Christians to love everybody.

"I owned a house in the village but could not sell it. My brother put up a wall around it so that I could not use it. After a while he said, Why don't you just give the house to me? So I did.

"As a Christian painter it is difficult to earn enough money to send my children to school. The Christian church in Bali is very small. Nevertheless, I want to continue painting Biblical stories and serve God in this way. Now with my heart condition I cannot work as long and as hard as I used to. But God will help me, and I trust God to see us through all our difficulties."