FROM FATALISM TO EMPOWERMENT
Intercultural Hermeneutics Across Generations
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This essay examines how transformative intercultural readings of the Bible are taking place not only between groups from differing contemporary cultures and ecclesial traditions, but also within groups who are holding cross-generational conversations with their forebears. Deeply embedded readings of the Passion Narrative are being re-read today as local religious cultural values are being questioned. Societal crises have triggered this re-reading. For example, the traditional dramatic recitations of the Passion inherited from Portuguese times (1561-1859)\(^1\) continue on Flores island, eastern Indonesia, but no longer as a domesticating word, but rather a liberating one.

We never read the Bible in a vacuum. Many, for instance, read the episode of the Last Supper heavily influenced, possibly unconsciously, by a Leonardo da Vinci painting, and so presume that only 12 male disciples were there, despite the synopics informing us that Jesus was celebrating the pasch which would imply that wives and children would also be actively present. In oral cultures the scriptures were passed on and understood through story telling, and also through pictorial and dramatic presentations. These readings across the generations can form an integral element in oral cultures, mould the dominant interpretation of the scriptures, be the prism through which the Bible is heard even in more recent literate times. On Flores island today printed Bibles are available in virtually every household and are regularly read in Basic Ecclesial Communities. Nevertheless, when dramatic Bible presentations are communicated down the centuries, these public recitals can become a fixed part of the religious identity and thought-world of the people. And yet, when triggered by a communal societal crisis, the people are forced to wrestle with what it has understood as God’s eternal Word. I am convinced that such cross-generational conversations are a transformative type of intercultural reading among literate people who remain strongly shaped by their oral cultural inheritance.

**Previous Dramatic Recitations**

*Biblia Pauperum*

Oral dramatic recitations of the Passion have been an annual event in eastern and central Flores for the past half millennium. One such fairly recent script was produced at the initiative of the European missioner Matthias Naus SVD (1901-1992) in Wolowaru in the 1930s. Naus’ confrere, Wilhelm Daniels SVD (1901-1967) encouraged a similar presentation in the neighbouring parish of Mauloö in the 1950s. When ministering a parish in the same cultural domain in the 1980s, I heard older people recall the performance in amazing detail: the conversations between the biblical characters, the dramatic soliloquies, the moving hymns. The entire text was in the local tongue of *sara Lio*; the language was simple, crafted in poetic parallelisms, and easily understood as the conversations followed indigenous logic using memorable, cultural symbols.

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\(^1\) From the eighteenth century onwards there were no resident clergy on the island of Flores; a lay-led, popular Catholicism survived in the villages of Larantuka and Sikka in the eastern and central districts of Flores.
The biblical word in their local tongue was mnemonic, whether sung or recited, and addressed to a people who, in those days, were mostly non-literate. Jesus himself proclaimed the Word in short mnemonic stories and anecdotes in his Galilean accented Aramaic. Similarly, the Biblia pauperum in Europe in medieval times, was presented not only in numerous illustrations within a text or on the back of the scroll unfolding before the worshipers as the lector read the text in church, but also in stained-glass windows, reliefs in wood and stone, and through periodic Bible dramas.

In the early phase of the evangelisation of Flores, the Bible was not understood by the receptive inhabitants as a book which was available only to literate clergy for use in worship, or to teachers for use in school and village. Teacher and cleric presented the Bible as an ongoing narrative of salvation that continually interfaced with their daily struggle as small scale farmers and market traders. The listeners quickly identified with one or more biblical character, for key biblical plots and story lines spontaneously resonated with daily life. Such stories, songs, proverbs and poetic recitations in processional and dramatic mode, were a major medium for proclaiming the gospel in central and eastern Flores until the population became almost universally literate by the 1960s.

The Word Absorbed

But what “Word” was being proclaimed in the early decades of the twentieth century, whether by the local village catechist with a maximum of three years primary schooling, or by the people themselves as they acted out Bible stories? While the initiative originally came from European-born missioners, the text came from the local people. The then one-million population of Flores was baptised in less than half a century and catechised by their own village teachers. They had absorbed the Word into their own world, and so opened their world to being transformed by the biblical word. This hermeneutic was communal: it gained currency in the entire local society.

Francesco Claver (1929-2010) describes evangelisation in terms of two moments. The first takes place when the outsider-preacher embarks on the task of converting adults who had no previous knowledge of the faith. The preacher attempts to present the faith as faithfully as possible. The outsider can talk of the faith only from his/her own experience and understanding; the local

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2 Parts of the Scriptures were translated (at times through paraphrase) into local languages, initially for proclamation during Sunday worship. For instance, Frans Calon SJ translated parts of the Old Testament into sara Sikka in 1897 and the New Testament the following year. Revised translations were published in the 1970s. Franz Eickmann SVD (1882-1952), ably assisted by teams of school teachers, translated the Sunday Epistles and Gospels in 1923 into Manggaraian, the complete New Testament in 1930 and the Old Testament the following year. New translations by the linguist Jilis Verheijen SVD (1908-1997) with local teacher Erasmus Dahal were published in the 1980s. Initially all these translations were typed and stenciled, being printed in book form only in the 1970s and 1980s.

3 The first complete New Testament in Indonesian by a Catholic scholar, Johann Bouma SVD (1885-1970) was not published until 1956 when Bible study in Catholic seminaries was finally moving towards becoming the soul of theology. The 1950s also saw a shift from a local culture that had been primarily segmented horizontally (social divisions between rough equals) to become a culture more significantly segmented vertically (social divisions according to status in a national society, primarily decided by length of schooling). This was marked by a move from ethnic languages to the national language.

4 The Portuguese Dominicans left two Catholic “pockets” in eastern and central Flores without clerical control, where the Holy Week dramas took root. Twentieth century Dutch and German Divine Word Missionaries succeeded in baptising over 80% of the island between 1920-1960.
converts naturally interpret what they hear according to their own mental/cultural categories. Claver states,

This first moment is thus essentially a dialogue of cultures, or more properly a dialogue between two people of differing cultures. The basic problem of this first moment, then, is the bridging of the cultural gap between preacher and hearer in such a way that the substance of the faith is somehow transmitted across the barriers of two cultures ... A putting together of the actual faith of the outsider preacher and the actual culture of the native hearer. (Claver 2009:138-139)

The second moment begins when the hearers, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, accept the faith preached to them by the outsider. With acceptance, there is a shift in the faith dialogue, first in the partners concerned, and secondly in the level of discourse. As Claver puts it:

The dialogue is no longer between the preacher and the hearer. It is now between the hearer and the very source of faith itself – the Holy Spirit. If faith is indeed a free gift of God, a gratuitous grace, all increase in faith as well must come directly by the action of the Giver. In this second moment the synthesis of faith and culture takes place in the dialogue between people of a definite culture and the Holy Spirit. Here the ideal faith that is the gift of the Spirit and the actual culture of the native convert converse. (Claver 2009:139-140)

The first encounter between Christian faith and culture is, then, intercultural – between the biblical understanding of the incoming European missioner and the local populace. The second encounter is monocultural, as the local people ruminate on and absorb what they have heard and make it their own.

In Flores, while outsider-preachers continued to insist upon their interpretation of God’s Word, this understanding was limited to formal, institutional religion, to the celebration of Sunday worship and the sacraments. Meanwhile, the local people’s take on the Christian message was made visible in daily life, in their local wisdom as expressed in story and ritual, proverbs and admonitions, and lived through a common life cycle. Thus, the biblical word was accepted into a strong, homegenous culture, with its own integral cosmic philosophy and value system, its own agrarian and ritual cycles. Spontaneously, the people’s native religiosity, their symbolic world and way of thinking and acting cohered with the biblical message. This is clearly reflected in the Passion Narrative, in the way they composed the account complete with biblical songs and dramatic recitations.

A Hegemonic Reading

Gabriel Pati Tukan (1936-2001) was a primary school teacher from Nusadani, Solor, East Flores. He was a person of great musical and linguistic feeling, an acknowledged poet in the Solor dialect of Lamaholot. He was often invited on ritual occasions to compose and deliver poetic

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5 The disparity between institutional church and people’s church is often designated “dualism”. A more accurate understanding would be to acknowledge the complexity of life and accept it as “simultaneous adherence” – an institutional Catholic in formal liturgy, a cultural Catholic in daily life (Lewis 2012). Where the two do not cohere, then a practical “working misunderstanding” allows for both to continue in tandem (Prior 1994).

6 This description of Pati Tukan’s dramatic recitation of the Passion is taken from Paul Budi Kleden (2011).
narratives (kenopak) in accordance with koda kelakê, that is synonymous parallelism where each term, phrase or symbol in one line is parallel to an equivalent term, phrase or symbol in the second. This expresses cosmic harmony: the first line opens a line of thought, the second completes it.

Pati Tukan composed a Passion Narrative based on an earlier one, Mengaji Krus Larane, widely used since at least the first half of the twentieth century and composed by Stanislaus Suban Niron with a total of 14 stations or episodes. While the earlier Suban Niron text was Christocentric, that of Pati Tukan places Mary as the key narrator beside her silent son. Without imprimatur or nihil obstat from the local bishop, and expressed in the Solor dialect of Lamaholot by a ritual leader, this text is a key expression of popular lay Catholicism.

Each episode consists of a lengthy opening prayer (some eight verses of two sentences each), a reflection which opens with an acclamation of praise to the cross with a response by the people, then comes a narration of the relevant episode (from five to nine verses), followed by Mary’s lament (from three to six verses); each station then concludes with a short prayer (two to four verses).

How is the Passion understood? Jesus is addressed as Great Father (Bapa bélén), High King (Raja Ama blolon or Raja blolon), Great God (Allah bélén). Jesus is the Great God who has willingly lowered himself out of compassion for humankind. The extent of human sin is paralleled with God’s greatness which brought God to earth to suffer. Jesus’ body and heart are free of sin (Kristus moé, nekino a tou di také/goé pulun moé mulun nèkin). Jesus willingly accepts the unjust verdict, and bows his head (nadon) to accept Pilate’s decision while preserving his self respect and dignity; Jesus is sentenced unjustly, but not crushed by the unjust sentence. Furthermore, Jesus is presented as one who did not run away from suffering. He is strong, “a true man” who, with open eyes, accepted the heavy, large and high cross (bélé ba’a, bélé belola). His courage came from a calm heart despite not receiving assistance from any of those closest to him. The text dramatises Jesus’ isolation:

Tuhan Yesus rasa waat naén baat,  Lord Jesus feels the heavy load
bulén seba kakan diké   looks for a helpful elder brother
pohé naé baan Krus kayo bala.  to help him carry the cross.
Raja Kristus bain nungene tuen bélara,  King Christ feels pain in bearing the weight
tedé data arin saré  seeks for an obliging younger brother
tulun naé neté salib wato tonu.  to aid him support the beam.

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7 Dividing the passion into fourteen “stations” or “episodes” has been traditional in Catholicism since at least the 17th century.
8 Paralleling Jesus and Mary is nothing new in eastern Flores. Since the coming of the Portuguese Dominican friars in the sixteenth century, the lay confraria of Larantuka has conducted Holy Week processions in which Tua Ma (the sorrowful mother) and Tua Ana (the suffering child) are paralleled, almost as brother and sister in line with local ethno-mythology.
9 Most formal worship is conducted in the national language of Indonesian; popular Catholicism uses local, ethnic languages.
In ritual language, Jesus looks out for those closest to him. But, as the cross gets ever heavier, he can see neither older nor younger brothers. In each episode the emphasis is clearly on the suffering that Jesus endured: his splitting headaches, yellowing eyes, empty stomach, cold perspiration, numb hands, sluggish feet. This depiction is not unlike those of Matthias Grünewald or in the shockingly violent film of Mel Gibson, *The Passion of the Christ*. Interestingly, the term used is *tuen bélara*, as if the cross were being carried not on his shoulders as men carry their loads, but rather on his head, as women bear their weighty baskets.

How is the key figure depicted? Visible and vulnerable Mary is the faithful one ever at her son’s side. Each of her laments concludes with the cry:

- **Eman tutu koda pulo**, Mother speaks ten words,
- tutu sudi Tuhan Yesus. expressing the pain of Lord Jesus.
- **Inane marin kirn léma**, Mother speaks five phrases
- marin sengsara Raja Kristus. narrating the suffering of King Christ.

Jesus’ sufferings are Mary’s sufferings as she proclaims the sufferings of her son. She cries out against the unjust verdict inflicted on her son in great rhetorical flourishes. While Jesus quietly accepts Pilate’s sentence, Mary remonstrates loudly: “What crime has my son committed so that he is to hang from a pillar?” Mary neither understands nor accepts. Her protests get ever louder. At the seventh station she addresses the crowd:

- Dĕsana dĕpan lali tana, hama ata diken datën He falls to the ground like someone defiled
- Tutu naan paté nalan, nalan hégé? Ana naén? He said it is in satisfaction for sin: whose sin?
- Lengata geluku lali ékan, hélo manusia milanén He collapses face to the dust like a sinner
- marin naan hélo nékin, nékin nalan hégé naén. He says to forgive faults: whose faults?

In the second station Mary had addressed her son directly:

- **Ge leron pi naro ané, soron léim rua kaé** Today why do you place *forward* your two feet
- hodé moén mala krus kayo bala, hodé moé a tou? to receive the wood of the cross, for what?
- **Nen nuan pali nano ga, soga lima rua hama** Now why do you raise your two hands
- hélo moén nala salib wato tonu, hélo tula nalan a? to take the cross, whose fault?

Clearly, the mother does not understand the decision of her son and nears despair. Mary is not only protesting the verdict, she is protesting the option of her son. She recalls all the good Jesus had done in village and town, the blessings he gave to those at the edge of society, and asks why he now willingly accepts such cruel persecution. What will happen to the crowds now that her son quietly accepts Pilate’s verdict? And yet Mary’s attitude had already begun to change at the fourth station when she met Jesus face to face:

- **Ema liko moé hala**, Mother does not defend you,
- ema tutu perodé onen. she’s only opening her heart.
Mother does not protect you,
she’s just full of emotion.
Go forward, follow the word of the Father,
until the mount of Calvary.
Step further in accord with Father’s guidance
until the hill of Golgotha.

Mary is not simply following a mother’s heart; she is gradually accepting the stance of her son and learning to trust him.

*The Pain of Protest and Perseverance*

But what reading of the passion is being proclaimed in each of these 14 episodes? Mary is not the silent witness of Jesus’ sufferings as in the Gospel of John; here she is the primary spokesperson, and with Veronika in the sixth station and the women of Jerusalem in the eighth, she weeps and wails over the pain her son endures. As Paul Budi Kleden brings out in his analysis (Budi Kleden 2011:178-187), Mary is *mater dolorosa* with whom the people, in the first place the local women, strongly identify. They are not alone; Mary suffers with them. Mary weeps and wails just as they do when confronted by unaccountable suffering: a child dying, a chronic illness, unjust treatment, a drunken husband. Mary is someone on whom to cling. Like Mary they cannot avoid such daily ordeals, yet like Mary they protest, and like Mary have remarkable resilience. Women are aware of the need to suffer and sacrifice for the sake of their families. They signify the flow of life, the fluid vitality between source and horizon, awakening and surrender. This cultural ambivalence is expressed in Mary’s lament: perseverance come what may, yet accompanied by protest and a call for those accountable to acknowledge their responsibility.

The Mary of the gospels quietly retains everything in her heart (Lk 2:19, 51), whereas the Mary of the Lamaholot Passion opens her heart for all to see the depths of her suffering. And yet, precisely here, the *mater dolorosa* becomes a source of inscrutable hope, energy and determination. The suffering one is none other than the mother of Jesus; if “the mother of my Lord” suffers so, then I can once again trust in God’s protection. Healing and freedom will be holistic when it reaches to the depths of one’s heart, one’s emotions, one’s very being, in what the Javanese call “the self within the self” (*aku-ku*). While there is no explicit word of hope in the text, identification with Mary brings support and comfort. Thus the *mater dolorosa* is also the *mater misericordiae*, the merciful one. Not a single phrase in this lengthy passion account indicates God’s anger. Suffering, whether systemic injustice or natural calamity, is not divinely inflicted punishment, for God chooses to suffer with us, *com-passio*: compassionate, generous, fearless. The Lord is the Great High King; suffering is caused by human sin. As the tender and fragile Mary weeps at the suffering of her son, the people seek her forgiveness.

Nonetheless, this reading of the Passion, through the *mater dolorosa* and *mater misericordiae*, has reinforced cultural fatalism, where Mary is depicted as “the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions.” (Marx 1977 [1844]). While suffering is not a curse, it is God’s will. The text, and its place in the devotional life of the
people, centres on personal suffering without a glance at the systemic roots of social injustice. This Mary does not awaken us to the suffering of others, let alone invoke our part in making others suffer, nor does she gather its hearers in solidarity with fellow sufferers, but simply gives expression to the suffering within.

Clearly, the Passion Narrative and local cultural values have interwoven, reinforcing one another. Yet even here we find an opening to an alternative take: Mary’s final lament at the 13th station ends with two stark questions that query the death of her son:

Koda dosa hakan neka, hégé ata tula tao  
Dreadful words are stored, who saw to it

nen betin bié ana goén, mata nai tanah toneh?  
that my son was beaten, died and buried?

Kirin gawé padun tao, hégé tou tula genang  
Conversations are saved, who forsooke him

nen tau gola uher goén, loka nai léwo baya?  
that my child was buried, departed for heaven?

Mary does not lead a protest march, there are no intimidating swords or spears, there is no systematic analysis of the injustice served on her son. But Mary does maintain her dignity and refuses to bend, despite her protest being greeted with silence. That, together with her resilient staying power, standing at the foot of the cross (John 19:25-27) will allow for an alternative hermeneutic. But what could trigger an alternative to this centuries’ long, deeply embedded, religio-cultural reading?

A Friday to be Remembered

A Geophysical Quake

A major earthquake and tsunami hit central Flores on 12th December 1992 at 1:35pm. In the Maumere neighbourhood most public buildings collapsed and over 2,600 people died. The army was flown in to assist with emergency reconstruction. Three months later the army was still billeted outside Maumere town. One of the primary duties of a brother is to protect his sister, and so on Saturday 27th March 1993, when a soldier brought a young woman home at dawn, the brother assaulted the soldier. That evening, at around 7:30pm, the soldier’s unit drove into town; they surrounded the districts of Kampung Kabor and Kota Uneng and systematically moved in savagely beating up every inhabitant within their cordon. Abdullah, a chance visitor from Lamahala, who was looking for something to eat, was beaten to death. This was in Soeharto’s day when the army ran the country. Maumere was overcome with anger, confusion and fear. The following morning the local mayor and military officials held a hastily arranged press conference informing journalists that gangs of local youth had gone on the rampage. Both regional and national press followed this official [script. Meanwhile rumours abounded that the town was to be cordoned off a second time. Men from Abdullah’s neighbouring island of Adonara, (a famous “warrior tribe”) began sharpening their machetes; others, frightened, remained indoors.

A Counter Narrative

10 Virtually unreported in international media. The quake was 6.7 on the Richter scale and lasted for a phenomenal three minutes. The epicentre was just 29 kilometres below the seabed and only 30 kilometres off the coast. Tidal waves took most of the victims.
A meeting of pastoral leaders was called. They discussed a range of possible responses. As the following week was Holy Week, the discussion honed in upon the Passion. Unsurprisingly the suggestion arose that the ancient Portuguese tradition of dramatically reciting the Passion be re-enacted and the whole town be invited to participate.

But a crucial problem arose: the culturally-ingrained hegemonic hermeneutic of the Passion flew in the face of the latest violent incident of military injustice and frighteningly innocent suffering. Thus began a conversation with their inherited reading. The ingrained reading, imbibed through the annual dramatic recitations, was no longer viable. Thankfully an alternative reading was available.

Bible sharing in small groups since the 1970s had acquainted the people with the text of the four Passion Narratives in their own homes and in small neighbourhood communities. They had learnt to grapple with the written text, read it in light of their experience and then allow the text to read their own lives. They were accomplished in spontaneous biblical prayers inspired by the text, sharing their faith in the light of the gospel. Yet, and this is the crucial point, the dominant traditional inherited frame of biblical faith ingrained through the dramatic recitations of Holy Week, a hermeneutic of comfort and support in personal and family life, a reading that supported the status quo in cultural, social, economic and political matters, had remained the dominant understanding. The more praxis-oriented methodological hermeneutic in Basic Ecclesial Communities had never been able to dislodge this overriding liturgical interpretation, long embedded in the cultural psyche of the people. Only in the quiet of their own neighbourhood communities had they ventured to reading the crucifixion as the culmination of Jesus’ option to journey to Jerusalem, and the death sentence as the response of the religious and secular authorities who felt threatened by the popular movement Jesus was bringing into being, his community of equals.

An Ambivalent Popular Culture

Under a military regime the ordinary people had few weapons at hand to take control of their lives and reassert their values; but they did have “the weapon of the weak”, that is, rituals that symbolically countered the unjust official narrative. Ritual has great potential if, and when, a crack occurs in the social fabric (Scott 1985, 1990). Increasingly challenged by the global market economy with its consumeristic-pragmatic values, local cultural identities are being maintained in rituals such as the dramatic Passion recitals.

Predictably, the Church hierarchy has periodically attempted to co-op these popular Passion enactments, but have not succeeded. Good Friday bibliodrama remain relatively independent of formal religion. They are enacted not through hierarchical mediation, nor through clergy-led ritual, but directed by lay confraria in public space at the centre of village and town. They nurture a spirituality rooted in their personal and common needs, in a society increasingly uprooted.

A Tectonic Quake in Biblical Consciousness

Tectonic quakes are not only geophysical phenomena, they can also trigger sharp breaks in biblical hermeneutics. And so during that fateful meeting of pastoral leaders, shifting tectonic plates under the earth brought to pass a paradigmatic shift in the people’s popular understanding
of the Passion. Heated arguments ensued as the meaning of the traditional normative text, proclaimed on the most solemn day of the Church’s year, underwent transformation. The reading taken as “constant for centuries”, was now *relectura* with new eyes, “something happen[ed] to the text and to the reader (de Wit 2012:10, 47). Jolted by the crisis, they wrestled for hours with the inherited interpretation from a previous generation, with what had been embedded for centuries. A debate ensued between the poems, songs and acclamations learnt by heart and passed down the generations on each Good Friday afternoon, with the more recently discovered reading of the Passion Narrative in Basic Communities. The army had inadvertently cracked open a submissive religious culture, shattering the encapsulating hermeneutic of popular Catholicism. This provided a *kairos* for the people to empower themselves, with an ability to break out of the centuries-long mold of Bible formation, and reread their acutely felt unjust suffering with a fresh perspective and so arrive at a creatively new solution. They were getting to know the Passion through exploration and not only through previous concepts and ideas. They were no longer listening to the oral Bible as handed down by village elder and primary school teacher. Now, with trust and respect, they took the Bible text into their own hands and grasped with it, bringing their more recent concerns and experiences, insights and perspectives to the text, and this in the challenging context of Suharto’s oppressive “New Order”. Heartful emotion and sharp insight coalesced into symbolic action, “the weapon of the weak”.

Only through this cross-generational, intercultural conversation at a time of crisis could the people break out of their embedded cultural reading and begin to re-envisage the Passion as symbolic protest, wherein the disempowered populase was transformed into an active agent of change. They were freed from the dominant reading tradition that had been imbied as “gospel truth” as biblical characters, hitherto lost in the background, were brought to the fore, in particular the temple authorities, Herod and Pilate. Rather than a primary focus upon the *mater dolorosa* and her son, they now discovered and faced a critical correspondence between the oppressive authorities of Jesus’ day and those of their own. Mary and the women of Jerusalem were placed within these relationships, as were the apostles, the crowd and Jesus himself who regained his crucial role at the nexus of the narrative.

For the very first time subversive private readings of Basic Ecclesial Communities were able to question the inherited public reading of Good Friday liturgy. Over against what had been proclaimed officially, and could be maintained as true in the public domain under a repressive regime, was now being interrogated by hidden transcripts which, until then, had been articulated only in small groups. In the words of Hans de Wit (2012:50):

> Sometimes a true counterculture arises [a] process... delicate and fragile ... related critically to and complements not only the [previous] reading but also the petrified, faded readings of church traditions. What cannot be said emerges, what cannot be thought or felt is expressed and people can doubt where doubt is not permitted.

As the women and men listened to and challenged each other, so masks were removed and a new delicate consensus emerged: the Passion Narrative was drawing them into [] strange territory and inviting them to proclaim a wider truth that alone sets one free. The resultant dramatic recitation
was fashioned in a complex pattern whereby the ingrained motif of personal pain (Mary)\textsuperscript{11} interwove with a broader vision of societal injustice (Pilate’s verdict). A fusion of horizons took place.

\textit{The Word Announced}

The people decided to reinact the Passion, externalising their internal turmoil, their thoughts, experiences, perceptions, memories, emotions, their hopes and dreams. They chose the Passion Narrative from John’s Gospel to challenge their inherited hermeneutic, their collective memory, their organised pattern of experiencing suffering, making their previous cultural mind-set accessible and open to change. While the earlier dramatic retelling was in one of the local Florenese tongues, this performance was to be in the national language of Indonesian.

Parish Good Friday liturgies were cancelled. One joint procession was organised under the theme, “Way of the Cross, Way of Justice”. The entire passion narrative of John’s gospel was proclaimed in 12 readings or “stations”. Biblical symbols sanctified over centuries through the vibrant Portuguese legacy were reinterpreted without changing a word of the biblical text (Jn 18:1-19:42).\textsuperscript{12} Youth poured over the gospel narratives and pulled out verses from the synoptics and John which they boldly enscribed on banners: “Again with an oath, he denied it.” “I do not know the man” (Mat 26:72) “Pilate washed his hands in front of the crowd” (Mat 27:24), “His blood be upon us and upon our children” (Mat 27:25), “Eli, eli, lama sabachthani?” (Mat 27:46), “Father forgive them, they do not know what they are doing” (Lk 23:34), “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk 23:43), “What is truth?” (Jn 18:38), “Here is the man!” (Jn 19:5), “Crucify him” (Jn 19:6), “We have no king except Caesar” (Jn 19:15), “This is YOUR son”, “This is YOUR mother” (Jn 19:26, 27), “I am thirsty” (Jn 19:28). The choice of verses by the youth for their processional placards needs little commentary: they confronted injustice, acknowledged acute pain, resisted oppression while acceptancing Jesus’ unconditional forgiveness.

Over five thousand townsfolk took part. The dramatic reading of the passion commenced in the town square (Gethsemane) and then processed to the local parliament where Jesus was brought before Herold, then on to mayor’s office to hear of Pilate washing his hands. The procession then moved to the police station to listen to Peter’s denial, and so on to the military baracks to witness Jesus’ condemnation. Jesus collapsed under the cross as the procession stopped at the court house. Crews of youth and adults took turns to carry a massive, heavy cross which was erected at the 12\textsuperscript{th} station, on the very spot where Abdullah was murdered, and where the gospel announced Jesus’ last words and his giving up the Spirit (Jn 19:28-30). The homily began with an appreciation of Good Friday by Muhammad Kamel Hussein: on Golgotha humanity crucified its conscience and extinguished its light (Hussein 1995; Prior 1993). The short, poetic sermon named the sin and the perpetrators were called to repentance. The army, fearing reprisals, had flown in a battalion of soldiers from nearby Indonesian-occupied Timor Leste, their hands recently bloodied; they surrounded the congregation gathered around the cross, their automatic

\textsuperscript{11} Key elements of the old reading were retained, such as the heart-rending lament “\textit{O vos omnes}” (Lamentations 1:12) sung by Mary as she unfurled a painting of \textit{Crucifixi}, the Crucified One; this time not in a local tongue, but in Latin.

\textsuperscript{12} The prayers and hymns were not preserved; these were chaotic days after the earthquake; I am working from memory and from personal notes.
weapons at the ready. Many were visibly frightened when the homily expressed in public what everybody knew privately but dare not name. No longer was the Passion closed to all but personal distress, it had now been opened to a wider truth. The public transcript had been subverted by a dramatic retelling of the gospel that transcended the boundaries of the governing cultural appropriation of the Word.

By the end of the five-hour dramatic reading of John’s passion in processional mode, the town was again at peace with itself. This was perhaps the most that could be done in a country where there was no certainty in law, where might was right, where people for too long had no voice but had now found the strength to identify with the suffering servant and symbolically proclaim the truth in public.  

A Cathartic Word

What happened that Good Friday? It was the beginning of something new. A town was brought from fear and anger to calmness and peace, from preparing to take revenge to being willing to forgive, from enervating despair to healing hope, from mass timidity towards regained confidence and renewed self respect. A word of Scripture was read in dramatic form at a crucial point in the town’s life. Culturally the cross had implied bowing to fate, accepting one’s lot as the will of God. For centuries, without resident clergy, without a written Bible or regular sacraments, the people of central and eastern Flores had continued with their annual Holy Week processions. Among a people economically sidelined, socially displaced, culturally marginalised and politically voiceless, the traditional Passion Narrative had reinforced their silent acceptance of fate. And yet after Good Friday 1993, the cross has also come to mean willingness to suffer with the persecuted, a willingness to take the consequences of speaking truth to power in a world of manipulation and deceit. Open to learn and be challenged, the people had reread the passion in dramatic and symbolic fashion, as a prophetic word, at a point when life had fractured and the everyday world of the routine had been broken open by crisis. Freed from the paralysis of their inherited hermeneutic, the word was allowed to speak anew in their lives and express their insights and struggles, their problems and aspirations in symbolic form.

Twenty years later people still recall the event, relectura the Passion in their own images and proverbs, often in their local tongue. The previous fatalistic rendering is no longer able to exclude the newer liberative one. The Passion recital of 1993 is being nurtured in both small communities and in the public forum; its memory has developed into a vital stream in the peoples’ religious-cultural consciousness, and become a crucial element in the peoples’ collective thought. It has awakening the people’s imagination, becoming a meeting place where people broaden each other’s horizons, “seducing” them towards new perspectives of possibility. As Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it, “A horizon is... something into which we move, but also something that moves along with us.” (1992:304). The Passion Narrative has become a transformative myth, a vision exposing a public lie, of how choosing suffering in solidarity with the oppressed can enhance dignity.

A Concluding Word

Hans de Wit (2012:5) asks:

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13 Documentation of the 27th March incident was sent to Jakarta through a legal aid agency.
in which ways can an intercultural dialogue on the meaning of fundamental narratives contribute to justice and liberation? Can cultural differences, when rendered hermeneutically operative, not give such depth to the dialogue on the meaning of these stories that faith becomes what it is ultimately meant to be, a searching and reaching for the truth?

Embedded oral cultural readings are not necessarily dislodged by literate readings in small groups; an explicit conversation has to take place between the two. The dramatic reading of the 1993 Passion Narrative in Maumere confronted the perceptions, the collective memory and the organised patterns of the people’s experience with a Basic Community alternative. As layers of given answers were peeled back, so hearts were opened to the need to probe and question the underlying religious-cultural theme of the people. In the dramatic recitation the two were placed in tandem, making them publically accessible and thus open to change. The old structured pattern of the Passion no longer worked; set free, the people discovered a new more appropriate pattern which they relentlessly wrestled with and respectfully proclaimed. Since 1993 biblical awareness generated in small communities has entered the public sphere, slowly transforming the mental landscape, animating local movements and regional networks, inspiring a politics of conscience that bravely confronts the systemically corrupt political culture of the area. It took a military “jolt” to break through enervating fatalism, crack the dominant religious-cultural code, allowing for a re-reading of past events and experiences, a radical examination of present relationships, an exploration of visions of the future. The Good Friday processional recitation was a holistic and participatory awareness-building process within a safe and secure liturgical environment, one which allowed for appropriate risk-taking, but which did not give rise to anxiety or embarrassment and so shut down the transformative Word. The Passion gave voice to pain but also could break through the people’s suppressed expectations.

For the first time Bible sharing in neighbourhood communities and a grand liturgical recitation were brought into an intercultural conversation and recognised each other as equals. To ensure an ongoing transformative conversation, a further step would be to initiate series of intercultural bibliodrama. According to Jon Kirby (2013b) bibliodrama “applies action methods to the written or oral texts of the Bible. The group explores thoughts and feelings, hopes and fears, individual and collective issues. Biblical texts make it especially powerful for religious and spiritual themes”.

If those regularly engaged in small group Bible sharing and those attracted to the traditional proclamations of major liturgical feasts were brought together to act out scriptural texts in concert, their alternative takes on God’s Word could enliven the participants’ understanding of themselves, each other and the world around them. It would help deepen understanding of God’s

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14 Bibliodrama is a version of psychodrama, whose originator, Jacob L. Moreno (1889-1974), defines as the science which explores a protagonist’s “truth” by dramatic methods. He believed that spontaneity and creativity are the forces that drive human progress. Psychodrama ia a collaboratively-directed, auxiliary-assisted, action-centred dramatic method, normally immersed in a climate of acceptance. Within a safe environment, the group has an opportunity to express feelings, develop insights and discover and express their unrealised potential vis-à-vis life’s difficulties and opportunities; to explore their worlds and learn more about themselves, their significant others and their relationships with them; to enable them to re-enact past experiences and examine current relationships; and to develop new perceptions or re-organise old patterns. See, http://spiritualityandculture.com/Sitemap.html. See also Kirby 2013a.
Word as it is lived in the present moment and in the context of daily life. Within a secure and mutually supportive atmosphere, participants would be able to access their deepest connection with the Spirit, as God’s action in their lives becomes palpable through their interaction with others. The group’s nurturing touch would enkindle genuine concern, compassion and love of neighbour, and the freedom to live it in everyday situations.15

The final word should go to Hans:

A few factors are crucial, apparently, for profound encounters that transcend boundaries: vulnerability, the masks that fall away, a third place... But the most crucial is the small gesture of love: the understanding that there is no other place where our capacity for love can blossom than the other, ensuring that love once again has a master. (de Wit 2012:88)

REFERENCES


15 A further intercultural exchange would be to bring the quiet acceptance of suffering in the traditional cultural readings in eastern Indonesia into contact with Filipino empowering “shamanistic” understandings, where youths have themselves crucified on Good Friday thus acquiring the strength to confront the challenges of the coming year. How come, the comparable primal cultures of the Philippines and eastern Indonesia, have had such opposite takes on Christ’s Passion?


