THE REPENTANCE MOVEMENT: HOW THE HOLY SPIRIT WORKED AMONG PEOPLE IN NIAS ISLAND

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ABSTRACT
This paper describes shortly a revival movement in Nias island. In the early part of the 20th century, a remarkable movement of the Holy Spirit took place on the small island of Nias, off the northeast coast of Sumatra, Indonesia. Its main mark was the turning of many thousands to the Lord and causing the church to go into deep repentance. Therefore, the movement has been called fangesa dodo, the great repentance. In this paper, first under consideration, will be the people and the land, then the background of the church in Nias, some precedents of Revival, and finally the course of revival movements. All studies in this paper are written in order to gain an understanding and an appreciation of how the Holy Spirit has been working in the stream of human life.

Keywords: Nias island, West Sumatra, revival movement, Pentecostalism, Holy Spirit, fangesa dodo, repentance.
1. The People and the Land of Revivals

Nias is the largest of the chain of islands west coast of Sumatra, Indonesia, lying immediately north of the Mentawai group. Administratively it is a kabupaten (regency) of the province of Sumatra Utara (North Sumatra). With an area of 1,842 square miles (4,772 km), it has topography much like that of Western Sumatra but without volcanoes. Nias’ coast is rocky or sandy and without any ports, and ships must anchor offshore of Gunung Sitoli on the eastern coast and Teluk Dalam on the south.¹

The indigenous population belongs to the early Proto-Malay and speaks dialects of the Malayo-Polynesian language. The Nias people have had pre-Hindu and Hindu influence on their island. These have left their traces in the megalithic culture and in the religion that is practiced. They consider their tribal forefathers as spirits who need to be worshipped.² Their adat (social law) is closely linked with animism. It teaches people what to do from birth to death, and especially how to cope with crises. Through the adat, the life of the people is structured in the finest details.

The island of Nias is quite separated from the outside world. Within the island, the villages are also isolated from each other. This isolation from

¹ The New Encyclopaedia Britannica. 15th ed., s.v. “Nias.”

without and within is one reason for the strong adherence of the Nias people under its administrative influence but succeeded gradually.

2. The Background of the Church in Nias

The first missionary who came to Nias was E. Denninger, a missionary of the Rhenish Mission Society. Due to the Dayak rebellion in 1859, he had been transferred from Kalimantan to Padang, West Sumatra. He had settled as a refugee in the port city of Padang. In 1861, he began to make contact with the dockworker from Nias whom he met at the harbor. Because of the transient character of the group, he decided it would be more promising to move to Nias proper. After obtaining permission from his mission, he, therefore, sailed to Nias in late September 1865, settling in Gunung Sitoli on the northeast coast. This port was the main town of the island and at that time the only seat of Dutch authority on Nias.

Through the years the Rhenish Missionary Society was blessed by having some devout, gifted, and dedicated missionaries with vision and a pioneering spirit. Some of these pioneers were also pastors of one of the established church congregations. Congregations were formed on each of the three major mission stations (Gunung Sitoli, 1865; Ombolata, 1872; and Gumbu Humene,

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1890). These were the first three mission stations before the church of Nias celebrated the Silver Jubilee.

3. Precedence Revival

The revival of Nias was certainly a remarkable visitation of the Holy Spirit, but it was not an instantaneous event without preparation. George W. Peters stated, "History is not only a series of events, but it is also God’s presence and work in and through the events." 5 There had been years of preparations preceding the fangesa dodo movement. Certainly, it will support what Robert Owens says, "As in every religious revival movement, what appeared to be new and spontaneous was the result of much prayer and preparation." 6

3.1. Translation of the Scripture into Nias

Translation of the Bible into the Nias language was regarded as precedent because it made the Gospel more accessible to Nias people, as Latourette says, “For the first twenty-five years progress was slow, but the Bible was translated into the vernacular.” 7

The first portions of Scripture to be translated into the Nias language were made by the Rev. E. Denninger of the Rhenish Society. This was a

7 Latourette, 289.
version of the Gospel of Luke which was prepared in 1874 and published by the British and Foreign Bible Society. Since it was published in 1874, the year that the first twenty-five converts were baptized, it appears likely that Denninger may have translated this Gospel of Luke and had it published for the first group of converts who were baptized on Easter Sunday of that year.

The New Testament was completed in Nias by Wilhem H. Sunderman in 1892 and this was followed by the completion of Psalm in 1903. Sunderman completed a translation of the whole Bible into Nias sometimes between the completion of his translation of Psalm in 1903 and the great Nias revival in 1916 for a six-line entry under Sundermann’s name in the 1975 edition of the *Lutheran Cyclopedia.* Therefore the translation of the Bible must have been completed before the 1916 revival. H. Sundermann died in 1919.

3.2. *The Celebration of the Silver Jubilee (1890)*

According to Bruckner, the Silver Jubilee was a catalyst that was necessary for bringing about a series of movements on Nias. Occasionally, they examined and evaluated the previous twenty-five-year

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10 Lueker, 742.
period and anticipated the future with joy, hope, and expectation because they believed that God was going to do something special for them. As result, the hope and challenge of the Silver Jubilee year of the Rhenish Mission on Nias in 1890 seemed to engage the spirit of expectancy among churches. With the new spirit of optimism and expectation which characterized the first years of the last decade of the century came also further church growth and outreach.

This situation gradually changed over the years, so that by the time of the Golden Jubilee celebration in 1915, it could be reported that the three or four stations, which had no out-stations in 1890, had expanded to thirteen main mission stations, which altogether had one hundred and eighteen out-stations.\footnote{Mission Review to the World, May (1916:325) cited by Bruckner, 26.} During the decade following the Silver Jubilee celebration, the number of Christians on Nias increased from the 706 reported in 1890 to 1,813 in 1895 and then 3,318, including 212 communicants, in 1896 or early 1897.\footnote{Kriele in AMZ and tr. In MRW Aug (1896:624) cited Bruckner, 38.} By the end of 1900, there were more than 6,000 believers.\footnote{Peters, 4.}

3.3. *The healing touch in Sifaoro’si (1908)*

In his doctoral dissertation, Brougham pointed out that this event was
considered an antecedent to the revival of 1916-17. From the report of the *Missionary Review of the World*, Brougham informed that this awakening has happened among the pupils of the missionary school. They experienced the healing touch of Jesus upon their bodies during an epidemic of measles, after successfully resisting their heathen parents’ attempt to take them to the animist priests. After the children were healed, they pray for others still sick, and God heard their prayers.

3.4. *The Golden Jubilee Celebration (September 27, 1915)*

Following Bruckner’s thesis, Brougham also stressed that the Golden Jubilee celebration was considered a catalyst for revival. The Golden of the Rhenish Missionary Society’s work on the island of Nias off Sumatra culminated in a union service at the parent mission station of Gunung Sitoli on September 27, 1915. On the actual anniversary, a meeting of elders representing all the Nias congregations took place with 158 present out of a total of 233. Native speakers were the only ones asked to address the meeting so that they would get a clear idea of what the mission work meant for their country and people. The first important question that was discussed was: “What has been gained in Nias during the last fifty years?” and the second part of the discussion dealt with the question: “What lack we yet?” Then the discussion was held under the following four headings: 1) sincere recognition of the truth; 2) the
unfeigned fear of God; 3) the obedience of faith, and 4) love for one neighbor.\textsuperscript{14} Thus the Golden Jubilee did much to encourage everyone to start work in the next half-century inspired by the joyful hope.

3.5. \textit{Bible Classes, Prayer Meetings, and Discussion Meetings.}

The Golden Jubilee has set a spirit of encouragement and expectation, and as a response, several missionaries were burdened and challenged for further outreach and Bible study classes, prayer meetings, and discussion groups. These were conducted in the eight or nine months between the Golden Jubilee celebration and the beginning of the revival at the Whitsuntide season in 1916.

3.6. \textit{A Spiritual Awakening in the life of one individual}

There was an awakening in the life of one man, a former assistant teacher. This former teacher was deeply convicted of sin and sought forgiveness at the Cross. After finding joy and peace, he and a number of his friends started a small prayer band that met after the Sunday morning services. He later became a great influence in the revival movement.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{14} Lee Ira Bruckner, “The History and Character of the Nias People Movement in Indonesia.” (D.Miss. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1979), 88.

\textsuperscript{15} Bruckner, 90.
4. The Course of Events

4.1. The Revival of 1916-1917

4.1.1. The Beginning of Revival

The beginning of the revival, according to Bettin’s report, was started by two spiritual men, college mates (probably Rudersdorf, the missionary in Humene, and Edward Fries, the missionary in Gunung Sitoli). They were not satisfied with the spiritual and moral results of their work. They longed for a baptism of the Holy Spirit for their repentance and they prayed for it. They joined in a private prayer meeting. Before they separated for their respective stations, they agreed to continue in private these meetings. Avoiding public invitations to prevent any from taking part who was not serious.\(^{16}\)

Then, Rudersdorf, the missionary in Humene, was constrained by the Lord, to preach a series of special messages to his congregation about the meaning of the Lord’s supper, and how to prepare for its coming celebration. When the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Humene congregation by Wilhelm Thomas, the Apostle of Nias, was observed early in 1916, Rudersdorf again spoke on self-

examination and appealed to their consciences. Toward the end of March of that year, eight believers came to his house and reported that they had experienced what the assistant teacher had experienced. Following this, Rudersdorf and others concentrated on prayer.\(^\text{17}\)

Not long after, an earnest young Christian woman stood up in a Friday night meeting and reported amid sobs and tears that she also had sought forgiveness and had found it. After this, three other young people reported similar experiences. As a result, the mission house was filled at the next meeting. The following evening when another service was held, a throng of some 300 to 350 crowded out the place people that necessitated the opening the church building. This was the beginning of the Humene revival.\(^\text{18}\)

4.1.2. The Fire Spread to other Villages

Proclaimers from the congregation in Humene brought the news of the revival, with signs, visions and voices heard, to other villages. Not only were Christians revived, but non-Christians were reached. They threw away their idols, became concerned for their sins, and sought the Lord to start a new life.\(^\text{19}\)


\(^{18}\) Kriele, 94.

\(^{19}\) Theodor Muller-Kruger “The Wakening of the Church of Nias,” in *Sedjarah Geredja di Indonesia* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia 1931), 115, cited by Brougham, 115.
In July 1917, revival came to Gunung Sitoli, the oldest station. Many repented. Soon after that, a people movement started north of Gunung Sitoli, in Hili Maziaja, through which many new believers were won and brought into the church.

Towards the west, mission stations were touched by the revival. At the same time, the Holy Spirit moved among the unconverted, arousing in them a hunger for the things of God.

In some places, the spread of the revival was hindered. Sometimes the chiefs resisted, other times it was some of the young people. In the western part of the island, certain tribes did not open themselves up to the Gospel.\textsuperscript{20}

Through trade routes, the revival spread even to the southern part of Nias where the missionaries had been evacuated earlier because of the danger of the head-hunters.\textsuperscript{21}

It took the revival movement six months to reach all the stations of the Rhenish Mission in Nias. While local factors were important, such as the varying attitude of the missionary on each station towards the revival and how the congregation reacted. There was also an island-wide receptivity towards the news of what The Holy Spirit was doing.


\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 116.
Furthermore, the Dutch had begun to build roads before the turn of the century, which contributed favorably to the improvement of the people’s mobility.

4.2. The Revival of 1917-1922

After 1917 and onward the movement quieted down. However, small revival movements continued to take place during these years, especially in places that had not been touched by the 1916-17 events. At the end of 1919, the congregations in the east and northeast were experiencing a revival on a smaller scale.\(^{22}\)

New movements took place at this time in the south, especially in Sa’ua. As the Holy Spirit moved among them, “Thousands of heathen rolled on the ground, screaming, pleading with God for mercy; women with open hair fell in a trance and were carried home by their husbands, refusing to eat or sleep, but instead, praying through the night...Sins of the heaviest kind were confessed with fear and trembling...abuse of women, arson, mixing of poison, fornication, thievery”\(^{23}\).

The classroom became a prayer room. The weeping of those who repented was heard a hundred meters away in the home of the missionaries. School had to be stopped for a week, because the children

\(^{22}\) Ibid.
\(^{23}\) Brougham, 119.
were involved, too.

4.3. *The Revivals in 1922 and 1923*

Gunung Sitoli became a starting point for a new revival movement. It started among the Christian workers when they discussed the Bible text for the following Sunday. It was Judges 16:20, "Samson did not know that the Lord had departed from him." When they began to apply the message to themselves, one asked the missionary for personal counseling. Revival of the whole congregation followed. Many requested baptism. They had been made aware of their sins through dreams. Great fear overcame them until everything was confessed. Ombollata, where the seminary was located, was reached also. Nightly revival meetings, extra scheduled prayer meetings, and much counseling characterized a "... spiritual and sober movement".24 In each place, the revived coworkers of the missionaries played an important role in forwarding the movement of the Holy Spirit. Even some of the chiefs turned friendly. Their homes became later the venue of the Bible teaching and prayer. The movement lasted three to four months.25

24 Ibid.
25 Brougham, 120.
4.4. The Revival of 1923-1930

In 1925, Sa’ua in the south registered another movement, evidenced by a strong hunger for the word of God. Sifaoro’asi became the center movement of the Holy Spirit between 1923 and 1930.

One of the most remarkable features that developed since the first revival movement in 1916 is the gathering of believers on their initiative in a small group. These small groups grew into a fellowship movement that consisted of individual Christian who had experienced renewal. They gathered for prayer to see God’s kingdom extended.\(^{26}\) Brougham analyzed that this was a sign of the believers’ indigenousness.

5. The Characteristic of Fangesa Dodo Revival.

Bruckner recognized that at least there were ten characteristics of the fangesa dodo revival.\(^{27}\)

5.1. A Deep Conviction of Sin Accompanied by a Great Sense of Guilt

Among many of the Nias Christians, as well as among some non-Christians, there came a deep conviction of sin by the Holy Spirit. This was accompanied by a great sense of guilt on the part of both individuals

\(^{26}\) Muller-Kruger 1931:51 cited by Brougham, 121.
\(^{27}\) Bruckner, 92-96.
and groups.

5.2. *A Recognition of God’s Holiness*

Along with the conviction of sin and sense of guilt was a clear recognition of the holiness of God. Many were stricken by the terrors of conscience as they suddenly felt inescapably confronted by the divine holiness. The fear of God settled upon them and they cried out to God for forgiveness.

5.3. *The Confession of Sin both Privately and Publicly by Individual and Group.*

Some of them felt that the Lord gave a tender conscience, and each felt that he or she must confess those sins of thought and deed, which the Holy Spirit brought to his or her mind. Day after day for weeks and months on end crowds streamed to the mission house and church to talk privately with the missionaries, pastors, and evangelists and confess their sins. The people patiently waited their turn in front of the church and mission house to talk individually with them. People waited all day and those who could not secure an interview with them that day would return on the next to see them. These confessions revealed all kinds of sins which neither the missionaries nor anyone else had the least suspicion. The following quotation illustrates this emphasis on confession and the
kinds of sins that were revealed:

"Singly, by families and by groups they came to me," said the missionary, "seeking pastoral advice, weeping, sometimes trembling, their whole bodies shaking. All of them had one great desire—to confess their sins. Some had again secretly worshiped idols; others had had resources to sorcery or had again fallen into other forms of heathenism and unbelief. Theft, impurity, adultery, and crimes against unborn life were confessed. Murderous attempts against the missionary had been in the hearts of some. Into what depths of sin, uncleanness, and vice were we compelled to look! Many a time it was impossible not to weep with the repentant ones when we saw the sin and degradation spread out before us."  

They all felt compelled to confess the sins that they had committed, sometimes years before. For example, one man confessed to the fact that he has stolen a coconut twenty years before. They felt compelled to their sins even if their close friends and relatives would not like to hear their confession. They confessed unashamedly whatever sins came to their minds, and no one felt ashamed to confess his sin in public.

5.4. A Manifestation of Tears, Brokenness, Sorrow, and Spiritual Agony.

Weeping and great brokenness, along with trembling or shaking, were characteristics of those who came to the missionaries, pastors, and evangelists to confess their sins. Many backsliders and non-Christians dreaded the very thought of the fear of God coming upon them as they had seen it come upon others. One such account is given by the Rev. Momeyer, a RMS missionary, who writes:

28 Bruckner, 93.
Some of the people who have heretofore remained untouched, begin to dread the very thought that fears of God may come over them. They behold the sufferings of others; but when the time comes for them, they are seized, almost in the manner of contiguous disease. Sometimes they come, designating a definite moment, "Last Sunday, in church, it got me." One of our ex-communicated Christians wanted to emigrate in search of work. Three days' journey distant from Gunung Sitoli he was compelled to return; his sins so disquieted him simply could not go on.29

This sense of burden and agony of spirit was lifted after repentance and confession were made and forgiveness of sin was assured and accepted. The exchange of sorrow and heaviness on the part of the repentant people for joy and peace was very characteristic of the revival.

5.5. **A Great Burden for Prayer**

Another characteristic of this revival, which is probably common in almost all spiritual revivals, was the great burden for prayer. The Rev. Schipkoether reported, "In many cases, they pray a good deal in private, asking that their sins may be disclosed to them. Sometimes they unite in such prayers with others, meeting in church or the teacher's house. Then, when they see their sins clearly, they come to the missionary and make a clean breast of it".30

5.6. **Crowded, Long, and Additional Church Services.**

The regular services were insufficient for all the people who wanted to

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29 Bruckner, 94.
30 Ibid, 95.
attend, so the number of services doubled and then trebled. In addition, it was necessary to make other arrangements to accommodate the vast number of people who wanted and needed spiritual instruction. Many kinds of classes, and meetings were conducted. These included Bible classes, gospel meetings, prayer meetings, conferences for different groups, and many kinds of pastoral meetings. In addition, a regular Friday afternoon congregational service was begun for fellowship and Bible study. Question and answer sessions were also held, and family prayers were stressed for every Christian household.

5.7.  *A Continuous Demand for the Word of God.*

There was a continuous demand for Bibles, catechisms, and hymnbooks. Since there was a real shortage of the New Testaments, Fries ordered 1,000 copies from the Netherlands Bible Society in Amsterdam by cable and later on another 10,000 by letter. Even though a revision of the text was greatly needed, it was impossible to wait for this. While waiting for these to arrive, he rushed to print small-sized Gospels and Epistles on his primitive press so that people would have it to use during the Bible classes. Eventually, only 500 New Testaments arrived as a result of cable order and these had therefore to be carefully distributed throughout the island.
5.8.  

**A Spirit of Repentance, Restitution, and Reparation.**

True repentance and penitence, which were characteristic of the revival, manifested themselves by not only confession of sin to God and man, but also sincere restitution and reparation to the offended party parties as far as possible. Things that had been stolen were returned to the rightful owners whenever possible. Where the rightful owner could no longer be determined an equivalent amount of money was given to the Lord at church. As one result, Bettin reported that the Chinese businessmen in Nias have been influenced. Seeing such strange things as stolen goods returned to them and lie confessed without any public reason and civil force, they became convinced of the reality of the living God. They have established a congregation of Chinese Christians.\(^\text{31}\) The other result was there was everywhere a great increase in truthfulness, a spirit of neighborly love, and trustworthiness, a readiness to exercise self-sacrifice and mutual assistance to those in need, and a great improvement in clean speech.\(^\text{32}\)

5.9.  

**A New Spiritual Earnestness among Believers.**

A new earnestness manifested itself in a whole new way of life among

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\(^\text{32}\) Bruckner, 96.
the people affected by the revival. This was both observed and commented upon by both the animistic tribesmen and the Moslems.  

Many unsaved people came to know the Lord. After their confession and prayer for salvation, a great joy filled their hearts and lives and their behavior was entirely changed. This had a great influence on their individual lives, their homes, and the entire society upon the island of Nias.

5.10. *A Burden among Revived Christians for Witnessing*

Muller-Kruger pointed out that this spiritual movement not only greatly deepened and revived the life of the weak church but also engendered bold witness through the lives of the renewed and revived Christians. Muller-Kruger stated that the bold witness factor was the main cause for the great influence of the Christians and the great increase in their number.

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33 Ibid.  
34 Ibid.  
35 Ibid.
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I can testify that the Holy Spirit still works in wondrous, mysterious, Pentecostal ways to fulfill the promises of His Church.

Whole-hearted conversions which change mind and heart, body and soul, and purify the private and public life are the best and most successful means for the propagation of the Gospel and the extension of the Kingdom of God. Nonetheless, a question should be raised, “Are we willing to see God’s visitation?” and “Are we willing to be used as His instrument?” Be reminded, “There is always the price to be paid!”
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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