
*Margaretha Adriana Alt: Mother of the Indonesian Pentecostal Mission* is a biography written by Cornelis Van Der Laan, Professor of Pentecostalism at *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam* (Free University Amsterdam) in the Netherlands. In 1973 Van Der Laan (vdl) experienced a spiritual renewal in part through being acquainted with songs written by Alt. Through this book vdl seeks to retell the story of Alt who for him is “an outstanding woman,” by giving a sketch of her personality, motivation, the environment in which she was in as a missionary, and the relationship she had and the influence it gave to the people she encountered (vi).

The book consists of seventeen chapters and two appendixes. The first chapter is the introduction where vdl explains the sources he used for writing the biography, a brief historical background about Indonesia, ending with a sketch of mission works that took place in Java beginning in the early nineteenth century all the way to early twentieth century. Chapters two and three chronicle Alt’s early life, beginning with her family background. Alt was born on August 22, 1883 to Johannes Alt (Jan) and Anna Wigleven. Her father, a postman in The Hague, committed infidelity and her parents’ marriage was dissolved when Alt was about to turn four. That same year her mother died, and she and her older brother were raised by their grandparents (14). Alt spent her youth in The Hague with his brother and attended the Royal Music and Singing School. Since she could not meet the entry requirement to train as a solo singer she was later sent to the Domestic Science School for girls (25). It was her grandmother who “possessed prophetic gifts” who nurtured Alt’s faith that she felt called to mission when she was just twelve years old (29). On May 28, 1903 at the age of twenty Alt left Rotterdam on a steam ship heading for Batavia (now Jakarta).

Chapters four to six chronicles her early adventure in the island of Java. An adventure that included working as a governess, an apprentice-nurse, falling gravely ill, being engaged for a brief period of time, a conversion through Seventh-Day Baptist in Gambang Waluh, adopting a foster girl, and recurring battles with malaria, all taking place within the span of a few years. In 1914 she returned to the place of her conversion Gambang Waluh, a former coffee plantation that was leased as a land colony for mentally disabled boys. She felt the Lord telling her that she is called to serve in that place (63).

From chapter seven to thirteen vdl presented Alt’s transition to and involvement in the Pentecostal movement. The Dutch Pentecostal movement made its way to Java at the beginning of the 1900’s through several lines, among them the Dutch Pentecostal Missionary Society (*DPMS*). Some missionaries from *DPMS*
were previously Salvation Army officers and they were sent by Bethel Temple, an independent Pentecostal Church in Seattle, Washington (87). Alt had been exposed to Pentecostalism long before, even longing to experience the baptism of the Holy Spirit. But it was through a dream she had in 1922 that she was convinced it was time for her to join the movement, which she did a few years later (95). Alt had an unpleasant experience in one Pentecostal revival. She felt she was forced to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit that she actually wanted to turn away from it. The moment of her Spirit baptism actually took place in a prayer meeting in her own community in Gambang Waluh among the children that was in her care (98). After her Spirit baptism Alt started preaching in Pentecostal circles and was eventually recognized by the Pentecostal Assembly in the Dutch Indies (PGNI) at the national level. In 1929 she moved to Surabaya leaving a church of 300 baptized members in Gambang Waluh (107). Not long after, however, she had a rupture with, and eventually had to leave the PGNI in 1931, partly triggered because of their teaching on tithing and the discrimination she received as a woman. This also brought about the formation of De Pinksterzend- ing (The Pentecostal Mission) which she took part in (123). Alt went through a number of significant events, including being held in a Japanese camp during WWII, moving to New Guinea in the 1951 and staying there for ten years. Chapters fourteen to seventeen recounted Alt’s move back to the Netherlands in 1961, her death not long after in 1962, the songs she composed, the legacy she left behind, and her life theology.

This book is to be commended as it tells a story of a person who might have been forgotten by history. However, because the subject is very personal for VDL, often the biography reads like a hagiography—not uncommon for this genre. From the onset it was acknowledged that there were “hostile brothers” from other mission agencies that Alt had to deal with (12), but VDL does not seem to show any awareness of some of the superiority attitude quite often found in Western Pentecostal missionaries toward Indonesians and whether or not any hint of this was present in Alt’s life (for an example, see Ekaputra Tupamahu’s “American Missionaries and Pentecostal Theological Education in Indonesia,” in Global Renewal Christianity: Asia and Oceania Spirit-Empowered Movements: Past, Present, and Future). The book also chronicled a typical Western missionary impulse; for example, it romanticizes the account when at the age of twelve Alt became firm in her call to “go to the Indies to preach the Gospel” after hearing a choir singing a song “about ‘heathens’ who lift up their bound hands to heaven for help” (29).

As the book was originally written in Dutch and translated to English by VDL himself (vi) the translation seems quite deficient in editorial work that is quite obvious even for an Indonesian like me. At different places the English sounds
awkward caused by the author’s choice of propositions, the use of verb tenses that do not match the time, and an inaccurate use of term to describe places, for example using Middle Java instead of Central Java the commonly accepted term; not to mention the different terms used to refer to Alt (for example, Margot, Moes, Moesje) that can be confusing for non-Dutch speakers if one misses VDL’s explanation at the very beginning. Addressing these issues will, in my opinion, strengthen the quality of the book as biography.

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