CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHRISTIANITY IN CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN SULAWESI

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, the great island of Sulawesi (Celebes), with an area of 186,000 km², was touched by Western influences only at its southern and northern extremities: the city of Makassar and the surrounding area, and the Minahasa on the northern tip of the island. Makassar, which after the fall of Ternate (1606) had become the leading power in the central archipelago, had been conquered by the Dutch in 1667. In the second decade of the twentieth century, when the whole island became occupied by the Dutch, the inhabitants of Sulawesi numbered about 2.5 million. Of these, the Buginese and Makassarese in the South had received Islam between 1605 and 1634; during the next centuries Islam had slowly spread to other areas. Minahasa, where Christianity had been first introduced in 1563, had been thoroughly christianised during the second half of the nineteenth century; but in other parts of northern Sulawesi Christianity had lost to Islam the footholds it had obtained during a period of Dutch expansion between 1670 and 1730. Around 1900, generally speaking, only the tribes inhabiting the mountainous interior of Central Sulawesi still kept to the ancestral religion. The coastal Muslims referred to them as Toraja, possibly meaning “upland people,” but they consisted of a great number of peoples large and small, speaking languages which belong to the Malayo-Polynesian subfamily of the Austronesian language family, but in many cases varying widely with each other. Later, under the influence of government and mission, these tribes coalesced into greater units. The Dutch government and mission officials applied the name “Toraja” to all non-Muslim peoples in Central Sulawesi, distinguishing between South, East, and West Toraja. In the post-colonial era, the people inhabiting the southern half of the central highlands kept to the name “Toraja,” with a subdivision of “Sádan Toraja,” living in the upper reaches of the Sádan River; and the “Mamasa Toraja” in the valleys of the Mamasa River and its tributaries. Conversely, the inhabitants of the Poso River basin and the isolated valleys to the west adopted for themselves the name of “orang Pamona,” taken from their mythical place of origin north of Lake Poso. The tribes in the hill country to the south of Donggala on the west coast of Central Sulawesi are still called by their traditional names: Kulawi, Ledo, and others.
Christianity in the Poso area and adjacent regions: the missionary Albert C. Kruyt

After the Dutch Missionary Society (NZG) had surrendered its successful mission in the Minahasa to the Protestant Church (ca. 1875), its sphere of activity was restricted to East Java, where the work among the Muslim population advanced with difficulty. Therefore the NZG took up the suggestion made by an official of the Protestant Church that it should start a mission in other parts of Sulawesi. In 1892, A.C. Kruyt (born 1869 in East Java as the son of a NZG missionary) established himself on the southern coast of the Gulf of Tomini, near the mouth of the Poso River. At the time, the inland region had not been occupied by the colonial government. The inhabitants were subject to the Islamic kingdom of Luwu in the south, and to two smaller states in Central Sulawesi, Sigi and Tojo, but their relation to these kingdoms was mainly of a mythical and ritual character. A few years later, the Dutch Bible Society sent the language expert Dr. N. Adriani (1865–1926) to assist Kruyt by translating the Bible. They were to leave their mark on Dutch missionary work in Indonesia during the first decades of the twentieth century.

In many aspects, Kruyt’s approach was still that of the nineteenth century. He tried to found schools, studied the local language, distributed small gifts to those present at the Sunday meetings, and provided medical assistance to the sick and wounded. However, in some respects he took a different attitude. This was not a fruit of theoretical reflection or theological considerations, but of practical experience in the contact with the local people. For example, at first Kruyt, like his predecessors in other mission fields, tried to “prove” that the spirits and powers feared and worshipped by the Toraja simply were not real, did not exist. But the people did not accept his “scientific” arguments. Kruyt for his part respected their attitude and stopped attacking their religion directly. Instead, he argued that the God whose message he came to proclaim was more powerful than the local deities and spirits. This was a level of arguing people could understand. In later years it happened that a village laid out two sets of gardens: one accompanied by the customary ritual, the other without any ritual, with the express purpose of seeing which one would do better. When there appeared to be no difference at all, the village declared itself ready to embrace the Christian faith.

However, for Kruyt renouncing direct attacks on traditional religion was not enough. Like his nineteenth-century predecessors, he wanted the message of the Gospel to penetrate into the hearts of the people and bring them to a personal conversion. But better than they, he understood that to touch the innermost part of his hearers he had to know the patterns prevailing in their minds. So he began studying local religion and culture (and afterwards traditional religion and culture in several other regions of the Dutch East Indies with an