CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE SHARP CONTRASTS OF SUMATRA

The cultural, economic and religious pattern of Sumatra was, around 1800, much more diverse than that of any of the other greater islands such as Java, Kalimantan, Sulawesi or Papua. This diversity was not only evident among the inhabitants of the inland regions, the population of the mountain chain of the Bukit Barisan that runs along the western coast from Aceh to the south, the home of the inland tribes of Batak, Gayo-Alas, Minangkabau, Kubu (Jambi) and Lampung. There were also, and still are, great differences in the coastal regions: the Malay Sultanates of the East Coast, Java-oriented Palembang, the proud and independently distinct identity of Aceh, equally distinct Minangkabau, just to mention some of the major cultures. Besides, there were quite significant differences in culture in the numerous smaller islands surrounding Sumatra. Since the 1860s large numbers of migrants had arrived from China in the islands of Bangka, Belitung and Riau. Many more Chinese, and later many poor coolies from Java, came to the new plantation area of Medan. These migrant workers dominated the tin mining, rubber, tobacco and pepper plantations, and much of the non-agricultural smallholder economy. The islands of Nias, Batu, Mentawai and Enggano preserved different cultures again. Many of the Sumatran coastal cultures had been Muslim for several centuries. The most assertive of these were the Acehnese, as well as the smaller coastal settlements like Bengkulu and, on the Eastern coast, the sultanates of Deli (Medan), Serdang, Langkat and Siak. There were also strong inland Muslim traditional societies in the mountainous regions of Minangkabau, Gayo-Alas, Palembang and Lampung.

Confronted with all this diversity it will be necessary to concentrate on two major regions of mission and church development, those of the Toba-Batak and Karo homelands in what is now North Sumatra, and more specifically on two churches, HKBP and GBKP. Different in many ways, the developments in these two regions and churches yield insights into the processes of religious change in Sumatra without overshadowing the very important developments in other regions and churches.

Missionary initiatives prior to 1857

The Batak homeland, (today the larger part of the Indonesian province of North Sumatra) lies between Aceh in the north and the provinces of West
Sumatra and Riau in the south, approximately 50,000 square km in extent, or one ninth of the land area of Sumatra. Dominant geographical features are Lake Toba and the extensive mountain ranges and highland, which form part of the Bukit Barisan range that runs through the length of Sumatra. Among the high peaks are active and dormant volcanoes, a number reaching height of over 2,000 m. The highland area has a cool, wet climate.

Lake Toba, which has a central place in Batak folklore and tradition, lies in the bed of an extinct volcano in the heart of the Batak highlands. A large island, Samosir that is about 50 km long and about 16 km at its widest point, dominates it. A narrow plain on the west coast, and the extensive lowlands of the east coast, while not part of Batakland proper, have had extensive Batak populations since pre-colonial times.

In scholarly discussion the name Batak refers to an ethnological grouping of peoples who share differing but similar cultures and whose languages, while too distinctive to be regarded as dialects, are closely related. These people are the Toba, Dairi or Pakpak, Simalungun, Karo and Angkola-Mandailing Bataks, each with their own homeland although in modern times many have migrated into neighbouring areas or to other regions of Indonesia. Whether ‘Batak’ is an indigenous name or one applied first by outsiders, remains controversial. The Toba Batak, who are often simply called ‘Bataks’ and whose folkways are considered by many Indonesians to be characteristic of all Bataks, in fact refer to themselves more readily as Tapanuli people, taking the name of the great bay that is a feature of their region. Similarly the Karo and others do no readily refer to themselves as ‘Bataks’.

In a discussion of the processes of religious change among the Batak peoples in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries two regions are of particular interest. These are the region of North Tapanuli, which was the scene of the German Rhenish Mission’s most rapid and spectacular successes, and the region on the east coast of North Sumatra and the neighbouring highland plateau, the homeland of the Karo people who resisted Christianity, as they had resisted Islam, until the period of rapid church growth after Independence. Both these regions, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, were in reality outside the sphere of influence of any of the European powers. The mountain regions were secure in their isolation and although accounts were emerging of Batak life, such as William Marsden’s report of a journey made in Sumatra in 1783, little account had been taken of the region by the European powers.

In 1824 the Treaty of London regularised Dutch and British interests in the Malay Archipelago by establishing Malaya as a British sphere of interest, and recognising Sumatra (where the British had had a foothold at Benkulen or Bengkulu since 1685) as a Dutch sphere of influence. Distracted by their Aceh War and other concerns the Dutch colonial administration did not seek to extend its rule to the east coast and North Tapanuli regions for at least forty