

“A Teenager’s Christmas in Bali”¹

A true-or-false memory shared at “Family Room Worship”

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December 29, 2019—First Sunday of Christmastide

Honestly, I don’t remember much about most Christmases. But I do remember Christmas when I was in tenth grade.

Maybe you, too, have had the opportunity to experience Christmas in a warm climate. When we northerners prepare to attend Christmas Eve candlelight services, more often than not that involves scraping the ice off the windshield and putting on a sweater *and* coat *and* scarf *and* gloves before we step outside. It can make you wonder how different it would be to celebrate Christmas in a warm arid or balmy climate. My research, conducted in Indonesia over four Christmases from the perspective of a teenager, is that the story of Christmas is just as mysterious and beautiful and hopeful whether told under the fronds of a coconut palm or under the leaf-bare branches of a mighty oak.

When I was in high school my family was living in Jakarta, Indonesia on the island of Java. I was what my classmates called a “mish kid.” Your title indicated why you were living in Indonesia attending the international school.

- There were “embassy kids” whose parents worked for the State Department and who tended to relocate every two to four years.
- There were “Army brats” (or Navy or Marine or Air Force versions) whose dads were assigned to be liaisons with the Indonesian military forces.
- There were lots of “oil kids” whose fathers worked with Phillips or Texaco or Mobil helping the Indonesian government tap their enormous offshore oil reserves.
- There were some kids whose parents worked for American banks or car companies. We just called them rich.

But I was a “mish kid” because my parents were missionaries; well, my father was on assignment as a teacher at the local Christian seminary; technically, my mom wasn’t employed but she volunteered with all sorts of social service and school-related organizations.

The embassy kids and the oil kids got to travel a lot. Their families would go back to the States every year. They might fly an hour north to Singapore to go shopping for a weekend and fly to Switzerland to go skiing over winter break. “Mish kids”? Basically, when we landed in Indonesia, we were there for the duration of our parents’ three- or four-year assignments. Church denominations paid to get you there, and when your term was done they paid to get you back Stateside.

¹ --with apologies to Dylan Thomas for a title that intimates that this essay warrants any comparison whatsoever to his prose “A Child’s Christmas in Wales” recorded by Thomas in 1952. I apologize for the fictional character of this biography, or the careless use of facts in this piece of fiction. I was trying to tap into the perceptions of someone who lived nearly 50 years ago and whose memory tends to be self-serving. I had no desire to impugn anyone’s character, so if relatives infer insult from anything stated, it’s completely unintentional.

So it was exciting that during our second year “in country” my parents decided that we would spend our Christmas break out of town. We weren’t leaving the country. We would go to the legendary Indonesian island of Bali. But we didn’t fly to Bali, or even take the train. No, in true missionary style we drove all the way across the island of Java to Bali. That’s only about the distance between Chicago and New York City. But that trip would take three days.

Why? Paved roads in Indonesia at that time were all built by hand — the country couldn’t afford heavy construction equipment, and in one of the most densely populated islands on earth, manual labor was plentiful and cheap. So,

- crews of laborers would dig the roadways *by hand*;
- then lay the foundation by putting large stones in place *by hand*;
- cover those stones with crushed limestone *by hand*;
- then spread molten tar *by hand*.

They were as bumpy as the dirt roads we often had to drive, but at least the hand-paved roads didn’t become muddy during rainy season. So our maximum driving speed across Java was 30-35 m.p.h., hence the three-day trip.

The real treat of the trip — which I don’t think my dad told my mom about ahead of time — was the ferry ride to traverse the 3-mile-wide strait between Java and Bali. At that time the ferry consisted of a U.S. Army landing craft left over from World War II some twenty-five years earlier. Our Volkswagen Microbus and a few other vehicles, along with dozens of people, bicycles and animals, were jammed into this floating bathtub which managed to stay slightly above the waterline the entire trip. I was too naïve to be as nervous as I should have been.

Some of my “mish kid” friends from school — Eric and Heidi — were also in Bali for the holidays. Their dad also taught at the seminary, so our parents coordinated this trip. We all stayed at Kuta. Kuta was a small rainforest village located on a dirt road branching off of Bali’s main north-south highway (and I’m being generous calling it a “highway”). The dirt lane ended at a wide, white sand beach — “Kuta Beach” — that extended as far as the eye could see both north and south.

In those days Bali had almost no development for the tourist trade. We stayed in a very primitive “motel” — cinderblock buildings with concrete floors, a bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling. With temperatures in the 80s during the day and 70s at night, there was no need for a furnace or air conditioning, so the windows had screens but no glass. Communal lavatories were out back featuring traditional Indonesian fixtures: bathing was done using a big dipper plunged into a tub of cold water and repeatedly splashing yourself; toilets consisted of a hole situated between two shoe outlines built into the tile floor. My sister was reluctant to use the squat toilet after she saw what she called “a large critter” in it.

During our one-week stay, my parents planned some family time touring the island. We went to Bali’s famed “Monkey Forest” which Mary and I visited during my sabbatical back in July. The Balinese people respect and protect the monkeys living in this forest, since the monkeys were there first. Nowadays the Monkey Forest has been built up to accommodate the crush of tourists — it has paved walkways and naturalist interpretation centers and a gift shop and actual restrooms.

When I was there as a kid, though, you just parked on the grass in a nearby clearing, walked on dirt paths leading through the forest, and watched the monkeys go about their everyday life. Sometimes that meant watching them play, or eat, or groom. Their normal activities might also include stealing your hat or grabbing anything shiny, especially if you provoked them by making eye contact, which you were strongly cautioned to avoid.

My parents also took us to visit the village of Ubud, which happened to be where Mary and I stayed on our recent visit. All of Bali is infused with art and culture, but Ubud is the heart of Bali's creativity in the sculpting of wood and stone, weaving and batik-dyeing, dancing, painting, crafting of jewelry in silver and gold.

In chatting with some artists, my parents learned that one of the small neighborhood districts within the village of Ubud was trying to raise money so they could build a new open-air pavilion for community gatherings. The easiest way for them to raise money was to sell off the carvings that covered the village's Hindu shrine. "After all," the villagers reasoned, "we can just make new carvings." That's how my parents ended up buying my Christmas present for that year: this carving of a traditional Indonesian figure called a "barong." I'm not sure how many fifteen-year-olds would want a Southeast Asian wood carving for Christmas, but I did.

My friends Eric and Heidi and my siblings and I were given a lot of freedom at Kuta; there wasn't really anywhere else to go anyway. We spent a lot of time at the beach, mostly playing beach football and Frisbee® and body surfing on the waves rolling in from the Indian Ocean. We read a lot. We sat and talked a lot. No portable music machines in those days. No phones. A vendor on the beach could cook supper for you. We teens were so "grown up" that one night we opted to try the vendor's lobster tail dinner with grilled vegetables. My meal cost me five-hundred rupiah – at that time that equalled about US\$1.20.

At night there were so many stars. Most locals used oil lamps for illumination; there just wasn't that much electric light in the area so there was no light pollution. Seeing the Milky Way galaxy was a cinch. I had grown to be able to tell the approximate time at night by the position of the Southern Cross in the sky. My siblings and friends and I stayed up late talking and laughing. Our parents knew that eventually we'd make it back down the starlit dirt road to our rooms.

One of the other families that had made the trip from Jakarta to Bali that Christmas consisted of an American woman and her Indonesian husband. I think they both worked for U.S.A.I.D. – the United States Agency for International Development. For quite some time they had been working through the process of adopting an orphaned Balinese baby from the village of Kuta where we were staying. The adoption was being finalized during our stay.

The village celebrated this new life for the child the way the Balinese celebrate most of life's transitions: by staging one of Bali's traditional dances. This was the Barong Dance that tells the legendary story of a lion-like creature called a "Barong" and its power of good that triumphs over evil.

This dance is famous, partly because it involves a large group of men assuming the roles of chanting monkeys: "*ke-CHAK! ke-CHAK! ke-CHAK!*" ["Kecak" is the Indonesian word for "monkey."] During the dance the Barong places the hero and his warriors in a protective trance. The trance provides the hero and his warriors with protection from the

evil powers of the villain. The trance's protection from the villain's evil is demonstrated in a most remarkable way.

I had heard of this dance – and you can see for yourself by looking online – but I didn't believe until I saw it with my own eyes. The villain persuades the hero and warriors to do themselves in with their traditional wavy-bladed knife [called a "kris"], *but...* despite their genuine, forceful slashing and stabbing actions pushing deep into the skin, the protective power of the Barong results in the blades not piercing or even scratching the skin.

Sometimes also called the Monkey Dance or Kris Dance, today the Barong Dance is performed authentically in theaters designed to accommodate Bali's flood of tourists. But we got to see it performed one night in the middle of Kuta village – performed *by* and *for* the village residents, presented under the stars and illuminated by torches and oil lamps – a village's authentic expression of gratitude. They were rejoicing because a man and woman had traveled a long way in order to welcome a child into their lives....

Which reminds me: this family trip was occurring because it was Christmastime. Yes, I know for certain that we celebrated Christmas in Bali, but I don't remember the specifics. I'm quite sure that the Fancher and Boehlke Families gathered somewhere for a time of devotions, and we probably did that on Christmas Eve since that was the custom of both of our families back when we lived in the United States.

I'm quite certain that the five Boehlkes and the five Fanchers didn't congregate in our very simple motel – there was no such thing as a lobby or hallway, and our sleeping rooms were barely big enough to stand in. Neither my folks nor Eric & Heidi's parents were the kind who would have been especially comfortable sitting in the sand on the beach. I presume we went to the "restaurant" down the dirt road toward the beach. There was almost no building there – it was an open-air kitchen next to an open-air dining area with tables and chairs arranged under the cover of woven mats to block the sun. That's probably where we got together.

My mom and Eric's and Heidi's mother both had musical talent, so I'm sure we *a capella'd* our way through some Christmas carols. And with our fathers being ministers, we bowed our heads in prayer a few times, and listened as the dads read from Luke's gospel. They gave voice to the familiar story of a man and woman having to make do while away from home, the story of minding-their-own-business shepherds being serenaded by heavenly voices announcing a life-changing blessed birth and urging them to go have a look for themselves.

And perhaps as I listened to that familiar biblical story that I had heard for the previous fourteen years, this year I pictured:

- no room in a humble little rainforest motel...
- and teenagers keeping watch over the surf by night...
- and the stars of heaven silently shouting the greatness of God who looks down on this expansive yet tiny world.

God sees a world populated by Hindus and Muslims and Buddhists and Roman Catholics and Protestants – even Presbyterians. God sees all that and yet sees... children. God's children. All God's children. All children of a great God.

Honestly, I don't remember much about most Christmases. But my life has been shaped by my Christmases in Ohio and Michigan and New York and Illinois and Virginia and Indonesia... and by that very first Christmas in Bethlehem.