PREFACE

This study examines the attitudes of college-educated Dimasa young people about their traditional worldview and practices, and, by necessary extension, their community's entire culture. Like their ancestors, it is a way of life that they always respect and often love. In some cases it is a 'tough love', one that is aware of the need for adaptation and outright change to better elicit the full gifts of their community in the contemporary, globalized world. Despite that, the young people I have had the privilege of having conversations with each greatly appreciate those facets of their heritage that they know about, and indeed in many cases want to know that birthright even more extensively.

The religious grounding of any community is, of course, a sacred thing itself, even more so in a traditional community like the Dimasas where beliefs and practices intertwine so completely with all other aspects of their lives. I have done my best to reverence that tradition in my approach to the study, in my conversations with young and old Dimasas, and in this attempt to capture where they find themselves as they develop their own lives. These lives for the young are, of course, much different than their parents' life. I cannot begin to express how deeply the Dimasa way of life, a way of life that is intensely conscious of the presence of the Divine in each intimate part of their lives, has touched and challenged my own views and religious outlook, one that is sometimes quarantined from the rest of my life: such is the reality of a westerner in the 21st century. The research I have done has exposed me to a completely new and often very beautiful world view, one that has sustained the Dimasa people for centuries. My growth as a scholar has been steep these past few years; my growth as a believer even more. For that, one of the Dimasa's gift to me, I am tremendously grateful.

I am immensely grateful and deeply aware that this study is the result of the cooperation and help of so many people. I agreed not to reveal the identity of Dimasas young and old who have helped in various parts of this work by answering my questions sometimes with amazed perplexity, always with great patience and kindness. Over 30 individual older Dimasas put up with my questions about their beliefs and practices; over 40 young Dimasas responded generously to my request for in-depth interviews. To assure free and honest responses I assured Dimasas young and old that, while their words might be used their identities would not. They must remain anonymous. I immediately add that any mistakes in the accounts of beliefs and practices are entirely my responsibility. At the
same time, there is a good deal of variety among individuals' accounts and understandings. This was part of the challenge. Not all Dimasas think precisely the same things, odd to my religious tradition but completely understandable in theirs. That very variety adds to the richness of their religious genius.

In addition to what I gained through this study, I hope that this dissertation can, in some small way, introduce the Dimasa people to the wider world. One of my fondest memories of the past years is the time Rodesh and I visited elders in Gunjung to gather information about their traditions. At the end I asked what they wanted people to know about Dimasas. 'Mention our women and their weaving,' they said first, 'It is the best in the world!' That was only the start as suggestions about their dance and music, their kings and heroes, so many most admirable things overwhelmingly tumbled out as suggestions. I promised them that I would certainly mention the weaving. It is indeed the most beautiful that I have ever seen. More important, it is the treasure of an ancient, faithful, generous people, a people ready to continue to embrace the many challenges of life in the North East of India.