

## CSSH NOTES

James M. Hagen, *Community in the Balance: Morality and Social Change in an Indonesian Society*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2006, 254 pp.

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In Hagen's *Community in the Balance*, one finds both a fine and deeply empathetic ethnography of a marginal hill-people in Eastern Indonesia and a subtle meditation on the fragility of this, and indeed any, human community.

The people in question are the Maneo, a group of roughly 800 living in the forest and on the coast of central Seram in the Moluccas [Maluku]. They have, only barely, managed to retain a tenuous sense of community through colonial incursions, revolution, rebellion, and now religious-sectarian violence. They do so, Hagen finds, by a fine sense of balance, by careful talk, by careful genealogies, by social distance, by wariness, by putting themselves in the shoes of others, *and*, he insists, by the exercise of moral good will.

This is not the easiest book to read. It is dense, theoretically self-conscious, and scrupulously argued. Reading Hagen, I had the same impression I had when I first read Pierre Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice*: namely that it was a hard, demanding read but that, in the end, richly rewarding. In fact, much of Hagen's text is an insightful instance of Bourdieu's view of the relationship between social codes and actual practice. Like Bourdieu, he rejects the idea that a culture is a set of rules and codes that can be applied systematically to life's choices. On the other hand, he also firmly rejects a currently popular alternative view, that social actors pursue their narrow self-interests and maneuver cleverly around the rules to "game the system," more or less as Enron did with the rules about "audits" and "shareholder-value."

The Maneo come across as wise and prudent, but wary, moral agents. They aspire to do "the right thing" and believe that others do too. But they know all too well the fragility of community and the limits of altruism and self-sacrifice. It is as if they, a people who move back and forth between a more solitary life in the forest and life in a village, know that the vessel of their community rides low in the water as it is and cannot take on too much more cargo if it is to stay afloat. They are moral realists. In kinship reckoning, marriage choices, genealogies, gift-giving, conversation, and oral history, they chart a course between their own desires and values and what they believe others can swallow. They often fail but, within the limits as they understand them, they make a good faith effort. Their idea of community echoes that of Robert

Frost who observed that “Home is that place where, if you have to go there, they have to take you in.”

One of the rewards of this book is that its meditation on community is greatly enriched by a wide reading of contemporary and classical philosophy. Thus Aristotle’s examination of friendship informs Hagen’s analysis, as do the writings of Alasdair MacIntyre, Richard Rorty, Martha Nussbaum, Hannah Arendt, and Paul Ricoeur, not to mention the sociologists Durkheim, Simmel, and Weber. It is this synthesis of philosophical reflection as it encounters a fine-grained ethnography that distinguishes this text. Implicit in Hagen’s praxis here is the idea that the issues of community and social cohesion are perennial issues of philosophy and ethics and cannot be contained within the narrow ramparts of anthropology as a discipline. This point of departure raises Hagen’s account of this tiny society well above the level of good ethnography to something quite special.

There are, however, at least two characteristics of the Maneo that mark them out as special. First, they are a fiercely egalitarian people quick to spot and censure any claim to superiority, power, and prestige. Second, they have, like a good many other hill peoples in Southeast Asia, never been completely incorporated into sedentary, state-regulated communities. For them, safety lay in dispersal and flight. These two factors alone make their relationship to community rather different from that of peoples who long have lived in populous, hierarchical, state-settings. In this respect, at least, the philosophers Hagen invokes are largely, if not entirely, concerned with community within the polis, as it were, while the Maneo are still negotiating a high-wire act between the polis and statelessness. Recognition of this difference might have further illuminated an already brilliant study.

Hagen misses an opportunity, in my view, to further exploit his rich material. On page 160 there is a striking account of a protest involving a cross-dressing parody of the Christian worship service. The episode is so intriguing, and the Maneo engagement with Christianity so germane to Hagen’s analysis of Maneo “modernity,” that one wishes he had pursued this episode farther. In this connection, Hagen’s informants, when allowed to speak for themselves are exceptionally illuminating. His main informant, Minggus [not to be confused with the great jazz pianist Charles Mingus but just as much an artist in his own way!] is a striking case in point. An amazingly rich and subtly argued ethnography could have been even better if the balance between what his informants say and Hagen’s ruminations about what they say had been adjusted more in the informants’ favor.

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Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, xiii, 153 pp.

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