TRADITION, CHRISTIANITY, AND THE STATE: UNDERSTANDINGS OF SICKNESS AND HEALING IN SOUTH NIAS, INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

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The thesis describes the range of south Nias villagers understandings of sickness and healing, and investigates how and why they draw on various cultural spheres in the interpretation and management of sickness events. Traditional notions of sickness etiology are set in the context of both Christian beliefs and the state's efforts to promulgate modern, 'scientific' understandings, in order to show how sociologically distinguished individuals draw variously at different times and contexts on all three fields of sickness interpretation and management.

The thesis begins with a history of Nias relations with the outside world, in order to delineate the genealogy of modern Indonesian attitudes to local culture. A brief medical history of Nias from pre-colonial times to the present completes the introductory material.

Traditional beliefs surrounding sickness and healing are introduced in the context of other traditional social, political and religious institutions. The process of conversion to Christianity is described, paying particular attention to the Christian construction of traditional religion and culture and the translation into the vernacular of Christian concepts. Contemporary village Christianity is described, and an attempt is made to characterize private religiosity and the range of Christian ideas on sin, sickness, and medicine.

The contemporary classification of illness into ordinary, spirit-caused, and witchcraft-caused diseases is discussed, together with the explanatory models involved. The various traditions of village healing are described. Finally, the various institutions of modern state medicine are described, along with the aims and local reception of government programmes aimed at social transformation. A concluding statement sums up the cultural dynamics described surrounding the interpretation and management of sickness in south Nias villages, showing how it is that notions of 'sin' have come to hold such a central position in the explanation of sickness on contemporary Nias.