

**Caged In on the Outside: Moral Subjectivity, Selfhood, and Islam in Minangkabau, Indonesia.**  
*Gregory M. Simon.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014. 255 pp.

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After the Javanese and Balinese, the four million Minangkabau of Sumatra are surely the most heavily studied ethnic group in Indonesia. They have long drawn anthropological attention for the apparent contradiction between their matrilineal social system and strong identification as Muslims. An outward-looking trading society, Minangkabau also became prominent on the national scene early on. In the 19th century, they underwent a Wahhabi-inspired social revolution; in the 20th, they provided a disproportionate number of Indonesia's political and literary figures, some with passions more socialist and nationalist than religious. As Gregory Simon points out in this "person-centered" ethnography, everyday moral life for the 100,000 inhabitants of his field site, the city of Bukittinggi, is shaped by the resulting tensions. Simon's book is a fine contribution to Southeast Asian studies, the anthropology of moralities, phenomenologically inspired psychology, and the ethnography of Islam, and is well suited for the classroom.

This is hardly the first psychologically oriented study of Minangkabau, but it is perhaps the most subtle. Focusing on fundamental conflicts in Minangkabau moral life, Simon is critical of those who would reduce Minangkabau to a single psychological ethos, value hierarchy, or ontological postulate. He tells us of people who are at once collective and individualist, achievement oriented and conformist, relational and autonomous, and quite aware of the resulting dilemmas. His case turns on nuanced portraits of individuals (necessarily skewed somewhat toward men, as he points out), substantiated by generous amounts of quotations from his conversations during almost two years of research. Besides offering nuance and concreteness, this approach makes the book a pleasure to read. Given that city life poses obstacles to the "deep hanging out" of traditional fieldwork, much of this book is based on interviews. Justifying his approach, Simon treats his interlocutors' words "as legitimate windows into their lives and subjectivities" (12). His handling of the interviews benefits from his great sensitivity to individuals and his self-awareness about the ways they are responding to him. Unlike some approaches to ethos and ethics, this book does not rely on people talking about hypothetical situations and cultural generalizations (although Minangkabau seem to have a weakness for just this kind of idealized self-portrayal). His interlocutors come off as highly articulate

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and reflexive, and one gains a tangible sense of real people grappling with problems for which they have no settled resolutions. But for the ethnographer, their very articulateness can also be a drawback, a point to which I return shortly.

Simon remarks that the people he knew were more inclined to speak of themselves as Minangkabau than as Indonesians, although the imposition of state institutions has affected such things as the power of lineage heads and the matrilineal transmission of property. But an idealized and often reified local tradition (*adat*) sits uneasily with increasingly standardized Islam. Where local cliché maintains that “*Adat* is based on Islamic law, Islamic law is based on the Koran” (51), Simon sees the expression of an uneasy half-awareness that they are not actually consistent with each other. He explores the various ways people try, not always successfully, to resolve this uneasiness, for example by relegating Islam to a transcendental plane that mere humans cannot expect to inhabit fully in this life.

At the heart of the book is moral subjectivity, which Simon defines as the ways people think about and experience human value. His emphasis is on their efforts to live with alternative but coexisting visions of that value and ways of inhabiting it. In their basic form, these values are personal autonomy and social harmony. Simon treats the opposition as both specifically Minangkabau and a universal human condition. To his credit, he suggests something more complex than a balancing act between self and society. As in many Islamic societies beyond the Middle East, there is a long-term effort to work out a *modus vivendi* between “local” tradition and universal religion. For Minangkabau, this centers on relations between the ideals of harmonious social hierarchy, on the one hand, and the competitive egalitarianism of the marketplace, on the other.

But Simon also portrays these moral struggles in terms of universal existential dilemmas, remarking that “in any society cultural conceptions of selfhood and morality, and moral experience, must necessarily reflect and elaborate on such subjective tensions” (2). The key dimension of human experience here is having a self, something he treats as prior to, and subject to elaboration by, cultural conceptions. These conceptions are the heart of the conversations Simon discusses. Consider how Minangkabau thematize the experience of deceit and the unavailability of inner selves to one another. *Baso-basi* refers to the high value they place on formal, deferential etiquette. This value is familiar from other parts of the archipelago, most famously in Clifford Geertz’s accounts of Javanese etiquette. But whereas Geertz treated the Javanese concern with formal appearances as a key to local values, Simon insightfully observes that “rather than see *baso-basi* as a way of cultivating aesthetic surfaces over interior depths, we must understand it to constitute the effort to place those things at the surface that belong at the surface—not because they are the only things of value, but because they are valuable precisely when manifest at the surface” (84). Moreover, the sense that something else might be going on behind that surface is both celebrated—Minangkabau sometimes depict themselves as unusually cunning—and a source of worry about the opacity that looms between individuals. This ambivalence is a central theme in the book. From all the talk about the oppositions between outer and inner, male and female, what is innate and what can be cultivated, Simon concludes, “it is not possible to put them all together into a larger, completely coherent picture of Minangkabau selfhood” (88). Although many social theorists have argued against

totalizing depictions of culture on axiomatic grounds, here it is the ethnographic texture that carries conviction.

This is a well-written, thoughtful, and scrupulous ethnography. It tackles deep questions with disarming modesty. It offers astute insights into how Minangkabau express their struggles to live moral lives. But Simon is interested in more than concepts; he is after subjective experience. If interviews give access to the former, do they provide a window into “subjectivity” as such? Developing the local contrast of inner and outer aspects of the person, Simon notes that Minangkabau protect the self through indirection—“sloping words” (162)—which suggests their talk should be treated with some circumspection. Since the interview has become so central to contemporary ethnography, I close with three general observations. First, the one-on-one interview is a peculiar speech genre, unlike most forms of talk, inevitably shaped by being addressed to the interviewer, and often contradicting local norms for social interaction. Second, it favors people who are skilled in self-narration, and induces them to be at their most self-controlled and self-conscious. And third, it has a retrospective (or sometimes prospective) cast to it, referring to things out of their immediate context. We can still learn an enormous amount from interviews, especially when combined with the wider range of ethnographic knowledge that Simon deploys. This book excels at conveying the conceptual and pragmatic resources available to Minangkabau as they work through their moral dilemmas. But “subjective experience” may be just too slippery a fish for this particular net.