

**Nicholas J. Long**

**Book review: open access caged in on the outside. Moral subjectivity, selfhood, and Islam in Minangkabau, Indonesia, written by Gregory M. Simon**

**Article (Published version)  
(Non-refereed)**

**Original citation:**

Long, Nicholas J. (2016) *Book review: open access caged in on the outside. Moral subjectivity, selfhood, and Islam in Minangkabau, Indonesia, written by Gregory M. Simon*. *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land- en volkenkunde*, 172 (1). pp. 146-149. ISSN 0006-2294

DOI: [10.1163/22134379-17201016](https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-17201016)

Reuse of this item is permitted through licensing under the Creative Commons:

© 2016 The Author  
CC BY-NC 3.0

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/73433/>

Available in LSE Research Online: April 2017

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

### Gregory M. Simon

*Caged in on the Outside. Moral Subjectivity, Selfhood, and Islam in Minangkabau, Indonesia.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014, Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2014, ix + 255 pp. ISBN 9780824838300. Price: USD 57.00 (hardback)

In this beautifully crafted book, Gregory Simon provides an original and compelling perspective on Minangkabau social life through an intensive analysis of 'moral subjectivity'. This term refers to the ways in which human beings experience their attempts to 'realize human value' and become persons of worth in the eyes of themselves and others. *Caged in on the Outside* thus guides us through a wide range of materials relevant to moral life in the West Sumatran town of Bukittinggi—from the categories through which Minangkabau adjudicate 'proper' behaviour to the conflicts that individuals experience as they attempt to enact moral values that prove difficult to realize alongside each other. By weaving these materials together, Simon demonstrates, it is possible to uncover the existential predicaments that lie at the heart of Minangkabau lives.

A particularly welcome feature of the book is Simon's highly successful use of 'person-centred' ethnographic research. In addition to the usual methodologies of informal conversations, semi-structured interview, and participant observation, he worked intensively with thirteen informants, holding repeated open-ended interviews with them over a period of months. It takes time for the value of this approach to become apparent: in the early chapters, which describe broadly shared moral concerns and codes of conduct, Simon's work with the thirteen informants appears to yield little more than standard ethnographic vignettes. As one moves through the book, however, the advantages of the person-centred enquiry become clear. This is partly because later chapters—which explore how people bound off and experience 'private' parts of themselves—invite detailed discussions of individual life histories. But it also reflects how artfully Simon has developed certain characters within his ethnographic narrative. Informants recur repeatedly throughout different chapters of the book, each discussion adding a new layer of understanding to what we knew of them beforehand. From Ni Tasi, the student who longs to be interviewed and yet struggles to divulge anything of her self when asked questions, through to Da Jik, the rags-to-riches businessman who wonders whether being a 'boss' is really for him, Simon's informants emerge as complex characters with discernible personalities and preoccupations—an approach which not only helps to illustrate the diversity of Minangkabau society but also makes the book extremely rewarding to read. This is a monograph that is far more than a series of self-contained chapters, and deserves to be read in full.

The book's merits are not merely artistic: as the first study to subject moral subjectivity amongst Minangkabau to sustained analysis, *Caged in on the Outside* is able to cast well-worn themes in regional ethnography in a new and unexpected light. A case in point is the importance that many West Sumatrans attach to their identity as Minangkabau. Having been trained first and foremost as a political anthropologist, I had always been inclined to attribute this phenomenon to the general importance attached to the concept of 'suku' in Indonesian political life, especially following the New Order's cultural policy. Simon, however, develops a quite different perspective. To be Minangkabau, he suggests, is to experience the self in a very particular way—one which accords value to a shared moral order, egalitarianism, and individual autonomy, concerns that reflect the historically emergent ideal of Bukittinggi as an 'Islamic trading society'. However, these values are in tension with each other, and it is precisely because identification as Minangkabau both recognizes this conflict of values and provides a means of managing it that the identity proves so compelling. Such an argument, of course, need not displace more 'political' explanations (although the state is a minor player in Simon's account; he describes its institutions as having been 'nudged aside', and none of his informants appear to work within the regional bureaucracy), but it certainly adds an additional layer to our understanding of ethnic identity in Indonesia, and substantially broadens the terms of debate.

The central chapters of the book are a must-read for scholars interested in Islamic metaphysics, as Simon develops a wide-ranging portrait of how internal experience is conceptualised, including rich and insightful analyses of issues hitherto neglected in the regional literature. These range from conceptions of the 'heart of hearts' (*hati nurani*) to contemporary anxieties about hypnotism, and beliefs about the Devil. He also takes the analysis of sorcery in exciting new directions by suggesting that supernatural encounters might profitably be thought of as sites of 'self-work', a proposition that he convincingly backs up through an extended analysis of the mystical attacks experienced by 44-year old Da Luko. Disappointingly, Simon's focus on this single example precludes a full consideration of his extremely stimulating suggestion that different *kinds* of mystical assault might be 'conducive to very different kinds of expressive purposes and may have very different kinds of significance for a person's experience of self' (p. 160). Nevertheless, this discussion once again demonstrates the value of bringing a theoretical interest in moral subjectivity to bear on well-established themes in the anthropology of Indonesia.

Yet at its most provocative and, for me, important moments, *Caged in on the Outside* does much more than simply offer a dynamic portrait of life in

contemporary Sumatra. It also speaks powerfully to prevailing trends in anthropological analysis, and makes a strong case for placing subjectivity at the heart of enquiry. Two discussions stand out in particular. The first is Simon's critique of Frederick Errington, who in 1984 used an analysis of etiquette to contrast 'Minangkabau epistemology', in which the value of persons lay in their integration with others, with an 'American epistemology' in which worth was ascribed to a 'personal self'. The second is his rebuttal of Saba Mahmood's argument that the logical coherence of a tradition gives force to Islamic discourse. Simon sees both these arguments as placing undue weight on the relational aspects of Minangkabau and Islamic selfhood, as if 'the self is only ever what it is imagined to be by its social context' (p. 191). Such models, for Simon, radically underplay the reflective dimensions of the self that exist always and everywhere, and therefore ignore the subjective tensions that all too frequently emerge when attempts are made to enact a logically coherent discourse. These critiques are powerful, timely, and well grounded in the ethnography, suggesting that subjectivity does indeed deserve a more central role in the burgeoning anthropology of ethics.

It is, however, a strange paradox of the book that—despite offering such a persuasive manifesto for taking subjectivity seriously, and despite offering a skillful and powerful portrait of subjectivity—it remains uncertain throughout the book quite what 'subjectivity' is, and what kind of analytical ontology its study presupposes. This is a deliberate decision, since Simon feels that 'highly elaborated theoretical architecture can be counterproductive' (p. 260). He prefers to offer us a more heuristic framework, in which 'individual minds and bodies bring together and work to more or less integrate different systems and information into the living of particular lives' (pp. 6–7), and this process creates the sense of self, from which perspective social life is then lived. Such a strategy does have its advantages—it keeps the text engaging and accessible, and it ensures that the thrust of the enquiry is driven by Minangkabau experiences rather than theoretical preoccupations. Nevertheless, theoretically-minded readers will be left with questions. How exactly do a 'mind' and a 'body' work to integrate information? How might variations in this process best be explained? Is moral subjectivity always shaped by a need to reconcile tensions between incompatible moral and emotional codes, or between relational and reflexive aspects of selfhood? What in the material is specific to Minangkabau, or Islamic trading societies, and what might speak to a broader human condition? Such discussions would have further heightened the theoretical impact of the study. Yet perhaps the fullest proof of Simon's accomplishments is that it ultimately doesn't matter that such considerations are left unexplored: his ethnography proves so rich and com-

elling that it gives his readers ample material with which to think through these issues for themselves.

*Nicholas J. Long*

London School of Economics and Political Science

*N.J.Long@lse.ac.uk*