

Caged in on the Outside: Moral Subjectivity, Selfhood, and Islam in Minangkabau, Indonesia

MINANGKABAU people (hereafter referred to as the Minang) have long been of interest to both Indonesian and overseas researchers and authors. As the world's largest group of people adhering to matrilineal descent, the Minang are unique particularly in terms of the social life of the community. In addition, the Minang are known as devout followers of Islam with the slogan 'Adat bersendi syara', syara' bersendi Kitabullah' which means 'custom based on Islamic law, and Islamic law based on the Qur'an'. The local values observed in everyday life by the Minang, and how they are connected to the teachings found in the the Qur'an and the Hadith, is of special interest given that many provisions of Islamic law are based on patrilineal descent. Gregory Simon observes and discusses the behaviour and attitudes of the Minang in this book but, as he explains, unlike most other ethnic groups in Indonesia that have aroused outside scholarly interest, the Minang are not, and do not consider themselves to be, a marginalized community. They have played an important role in the intellectual, political, and economic fields in Indonesia. Simon presents evidence for the strong, visible presence of the Minang in the history of Indonesia. An example is Bung Hatta, who served as the first Vice President of the Republic of Indonesia under the Sukarno administration. Also, study of Minang manuscripts has identified a lot of intellectual works, which deal with social life, politics, and economics, and Islam in everyday life, as documented by M. Yusuf et al. *Katalogus Manuskrip Dan Skriptorium Minangkabau* (Center for Documentation and Area-Transcultural Studies, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies).

Judul Buku

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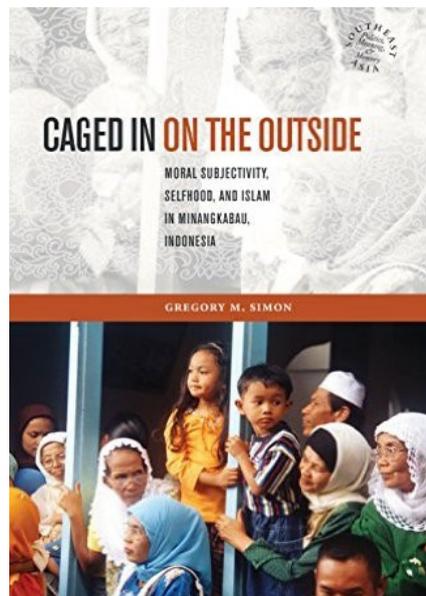
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Peresensi

Zaenuddin Hudi Prasajo

Tahimpit Tapi di Ateh' meaning 'it's OK to be squeezed on top'. This expression and the one used as the title both mean that the Minang always find a way out of problems they may be facing. Familiarity with the local, essential for ethnographic research, is not quickly achieved. Simon's book is the result of very long research and patient, careful reflection. In parts of it he demonstrates a remarkable ability to penetrate into sensitive domains of Minang life that are not easy for an outsider to gain access to. Simon was able to translate the signs and symbols of the Minang into something they would themselves recognize as what they meant to express. This is the great strength of Simon's work, the fruit of his commitment to carefully and thoroughly conducted ethnographical research—as he says in the Introduction.

Simon's discussion begins (ch. 1) with geographical features of Bukittinggi where he did the research on which the book is based. His account of the community of Bukittinggi is divided into the 'village' and the 'market'. This division is interesting because the two zones have different characteristics: the kampung has a pattern of communal life with social control still strong because the people of the villages in the region of Minangkabau tend to be more closely tied to Islamic norms and family structure. The 'market' by contrast is more open, it is where competition and freedom may be found, and outside influences are evident. There is no doubt that Islam remains nevertheless an important marker of the life of the Minang people who live around the market. Simon continues (ch. 2) the descriptive part of the work with focus on the identity of the Minang, compris-



The title of the book, *Caged in on the Outside*, illustrates very well Gregory Simon's grasp of the local cultural idioms and their linguistic expression. Several phrases similar to the title come to mind, such as 'Buliah

ing (as mentioned earlier) the three key elements of adat (traditional local culture), Islam, and the native spirit of the Minang who are smart, bright and adept at playing roles in everyday life, which include reconciling custom and Islam in cases of conflict. Chapter 3 has a more detailed account of the individual character of the Minang. Simon explains the ethical values and attitudes that underpin the etiquettes of Minang community life, including the attitude to arrogance, and to the civilities which are the mark of good character in a Minang individual.

In ch. 4, the author widens the discussion of moral attitudes among the Minang to take in the context of community life and the world. He titles this part 'Living with the Devil: Pure Selves and a Corrupting World'. He explores the manners of the Minang who strongly uphold customary politeness by explaining the sense of shame, reticence, and other important attitudes based on the teachings of Islam. For the Minang, those who have been brought up from childhood in the tradition of the Minang would certainly not commit an act prohibited by the religion,

even though they have the opportunity to do so. However, as Simon also explains, the influences that shape the attitudes of the Minang do not come only from within themselves but also from the outside world, the particular situation and general environment. Those who are caught up in an increasingly violent world need to be able to distinguish themselves from others and not be tempted by worldly advantage and luxury. Simon continues this discussion of the fight between the conditions of the modern world and the obligation to observe the Islamic teachings in chs. 5 and 6. He argues that selfhood is the key to the identity values of the Minang, who always strive to be good persons by becoming Muslims who practise the Islamic teachings. Only by being a good Muslim and respecting the customs, can a Minang person maintain his/her Minang identity as smart, bright, and civilized, according to the principle of *Adat Bersendi Syara', Syara' Bersendi Kitabullah*. The flavour of Simon's conclusion is evident from its opening:

Autonomous and socially constituted dimensions of self are complexly

elaborated and morally celebrated in Minangkabau. They are highly salient elements of social experience for people living in the society, as they are likely to be elsewhere for people who find themselves both deeply enmeshed in relationships with others and very much dependent on autonomous activity in a competitive marketplace. Islamic practices and discourses, reaching out toward notions of social unity, submission to authority, and individual responsibility, form one arena in which these tensions can be confronted.

I certainly agree with that statement and strongly recommend the book—it will enrich understanding of the culture of the local community and Islamic studies in Indonesia and elsewhere. More specifically, it presents a picture of Islam in Indonesia from the perspective of an outsider, which certainly differs from the perspective of the insider (an Indonesian or a Minang). 'The Islam of the Minang' might be a fitting description of the author's conclusion.

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