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