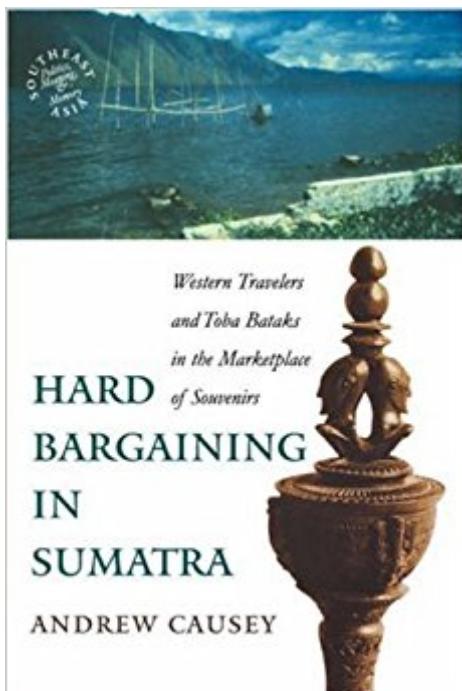


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Hard Bargaining In Sumatra: Western Travelers And Toba Bataks In The Marketplace Of Souvenirs (Southeast Asia)



Synopsis

Hard Bargaining in Sumatra is an artfully written and penetrating examination of interactions between Western travelers and Toba Batak wood carvers in the souvenir marketplaces of Samosir Island, North Sumatra. Toba Batak carvings, ranging from simple human figures of wood to elaborately engraved water buffalo horns, are described in tourist guidebooks and by Toba Batak vendors alike as traditional and antique, despite many recent changes and inventions in form. This pathbreaking work investigates how notions of place and self are constructed by the travelers and the Bataks in the context of ethnic tourism. The author proposes that these interactions be understood in light of Louis Marin's concept of utopics, suggesting that tourist venues such as hotels and marketplaces are neutral spaces where both locals and visitors can act out behaviors that would ordinarily be constrained by their respective cultures. Rich in ethnographic description and employing a lively narrative style, Hard Bargaining in Sumatra is essential reading for students and scholars with interests in anthropology, cultural studies, globalization and tourism research, art history, and identity studies.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Andrew Causey is professor of anthropology at Columbia College Chicago.

great book

Like most working stiffs, I save up for a big vacation to some far away land and when it finally happens I get shuffled around from one tourist spot to the next. The culture presents itself for purchase and I buy. "Hard Bargaining in Sumatra" isn't just a book by an affable scholar. It immediately took me into the home of a very different family, sat me on a 'fancy mat' and amused me with a narrative by the author to his Toba Batak friends. He told a story for their entertainment that might easily have described my own hapless first experience in an exotic culture. The family's reaction and the unfolding details of their work in the woodcarving-for-tourists trade was a pleasure to read. I was continuously surprised at how clearly Causey expressed complicated, seldom-analyzed notions of place and identity. The relationship between tourist and vacation spot is alive and dynamic in a way I'd never imagined. The author's struggle to learn the skills of the woodcarver gave extra dimension to my understanding of this traditional craft. The friendship between the student/researcher and the teacher/subject made the dynamics of the familial roles and societal obligations disarmingly vivid and personal. The book enriched my understanding of a distant culture to a degree I could never have achieved by hopping a plane and wandering their marketplaces. When I saw a Toba Batak carving at an art museum a few weeks later, I had a wealth of feelings and observations that would never have occurred to me before. For me, reading this book was like the best kind of vacation. I learned a lot, felt a connection to the people and culture, and enjoyed the process.

This book is a true rarity--a work of serious scholarship, written in a user-friendly, personal, poetic, eminently-readable style. You'd almost be fooled into thinking you were reading a romantic travel narrative, one of those popular memoirs à la "Under the Tuscan Sun" where a naive American goes off and has a life-transforming experience while in a foreign land. But as Dr. Causey relates his tales of the months spent with the Toba Batak in their remote, beautiful homeland in northern Sumatra, learning something about their culture, something about woodcarving, and a LOT about shopping, he also unfolds a series of subtle, complex observations about aesthetics, about colonialism and acquisition, and about the role of tourists / collectors in a market economy and their effect as both destroyers and saviors of traditional culture. Absolutely fascinating stuff, and certainly not just for students of anthropology--this is a book that should be read by art historians as well as by economists, as well as by anyone who simply enjoys a well-written tale of a beautiful place that they've never been...I particularly admire "Hard Bargaining" for the lack of any tang of cultural superiority on Dr. Causey's part--he never assumes that he knows more than the people he's observing, or that since he has a Ph.D., his observations must be considered correct. He went

there; he lived, he learned, he shopped; and he thought about it, hard, and critically, comparing the Toba Batak culture to our own, and letting the reader make the judgement calls, not the anthropologist. Very well done!

"What happens when the homeland of one group is also claimed as the vacationland of another group?" This question put by the author rather succinctly sums up a major theme of the book, and perhaps should be a guiding thought for all of us who ever take a vacation...anywhere. Whether we are taking a "package" vacation or just winging it in a new location, we have an impact not only on the place we visit, the feeling of the place, the services it provides, and perhaps most importantly, the ART of the place. Souvenirs...mementos...folk art...all these tokens and totems that come from our vacation spot are evolving to meet our desires. The author handles this idea and others in a very human and sensitive way, inviting us into his experience in Sumatra, Indonesia and filling our minds with the sense of the place: its smells, visuals, sounds, landscape and its people. It is easy to lose oneself in this book as if it were a novel or the travelogue, yet it tackles some very difficult issues without sounding preachy or judgmental. I have always been interested in, and sensitive to the general "sense" of a place. I can be easily spooked by the quality of light or the sight of long shadows in the afternoon. I found Dr. Causey to be a kindred spirit, as he has addressed this feeling (because it is at heart a "feeling") very poetically in his writing about Lake Toba. There are many humourous vignettes within the book, as well as many parables and lessons. It is indeed educational, and educational on a new level-it reaches right into the spaces between ideas and brings into being a hybrid way of looking. It is accessible, informative and heartfelt. I would recommend this book to anyone - it can be read for sheer pleasure. But if you are planning to travel, and would like to get some ideas on developing a very diplomatic and culturally sensitive approach to your new destination, this is most certainly the book for you. I nominate Dr. Causey for Goodwill Ambassador!

A first rate work and a wonderful read. This book was delightful to read. Right from the beginning of the book, I was drawn in. It's clear this is a scholarly work, well researched and carefully detailed. As a reader of more casual literature, I was agreeably surprised at the superior writing style of the author. I thoroughly enjoyed the experiences and anecdotes throughout the whole book. Anyone who enjoys reading about other cultures and other places would definitely enjoy reading this book. I stayed up to 1:00 am one night reading it. I look forward with real anticipation to future works from this author.

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