

*Hard Bargaining in Sumatra: Western Travelers and Toba Bataks in the Marketplace of Souvenirs.* By Andrew Causey. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003. 292 pp.

With this publication Andrew Causey has delivered a most accessible and engrossing ethnographic study that should appeal to a wide readership in anthropology, cultural studies, and Asian studies in general. Combining the sensibility of a practising artist with the rigour of latterly acquired skills as an ethnographer, Causey presents a timely examination of a yet to be fully realized area of ethnographic enquiry, namely, the “space” within which indigenous hosts encounter and interact with foreign Western tourists. Causey takes as his particular focus the island of Samosir located in the heart of the tourist resort district of lake Toba in the province of North Sumatra, home to the Batak, one of Indonesia’s largest and most recognizable ethnic groups. His goals are, firstly, to provide an understanding of the motivations driving Western backpacking travellers to visit the region and participate in the marketplace for souvenirs, particularly wooden statues and objects. Secondly, he elucidates the cultural constructions the Toba Batak develop and apply in making sense of those motivations and desires that are key contributors to a renaissance in the craft of wood carving, which, prior to mass tourism, was a dying practice.

Causey’s approach to his subject is based upon a theoretical framework prioritizing a world where meaning is in flux. Whilst this is arguably the sine qua non feature of human sociality generally speaking, ethnographers have only recently begun to give this in many ways simple, yet profound, insight its due place in social analysis — and Causey’s narrative is a fine example of what can be the result. Causey achieves this through his resort to the use of a first person narrative style — an almost dialogic approach, reminiscent of Kevin Dwyer’s (1982) *Moroccan Dialogues* — in which the researcher–cum–participant observer is clearly foregrounded in the context of conversations held with his key informant, Partoho. As Causey remarks, it is his goal

to most closely approximate the oral style in which his data was delivered, to “evoke the flavor of the narratives I heard so often while sitting on the woven mats of my Toba Batak friends”. This practice gives us insight into the key relationship between Causey and Partoho, the master carver, and Ito, his wife, the master stainer, the former to whom he becomes apprenticed as a carver of statues and art objects for the tourist market. The book is mainly composed of such narrative moments, and whilst we might wince a little at the perhaps excessively romanticist claim on the part of the author to allow “insignificant moments” to “sing their implications to the fullest”, the presentation of open narrative supplemented by short expository passages, as well as ample endnotes for those wishing to explore points made in greater detail, is effective nonetheless.

A foundation construct is that of the “touristic place ... the place that is both home and not-home ... a kind of neutral zone, where cultural rules were partially suspended so that fantasies and urges could be acted out”. In support of this Causey emphasizes the agency of the “guests” with his neologism the “tourate”, arguing that studies on tourism tend to present images of passive locals being acted upon by outsiders marked as the locus of agency. In Causey’s view, rather than hosts and guests we find tourists/travellers and “tourates” in which both are on equal ground in negotiating identity(ies) and meaning. This agency is a crucial element in Causey’s argument that the “touristic place” is best understood in terms of Louis Marin’s concept of “utopic space”, where the normally separate physical and conceptual worlds of tourists and tourates come together, and where the norms and values characterizing each are open, albeit temporarily, to suspension, manipulation, and innovation. Such a space is utopic since it allows its participants to “playfully explore possible ways of being that eventually contribute to their own growth or change”. Its participants act in ways that are not sanctioned by the “dominant ideologies of home”. The scripts, then, that normally guide the Batak tourates and souvenir-hunting travellers elsewhere come to be temporarily replaced by improvisation within such utopic space.

There exist several of these spaces or zones. However, the most important space for the author's purposes is that of the marketplace. This is where the differing conceptual schemes endowing the statues for sale with differential value come into direct contact. The Batak vendors are acutely aware of what aspects travellers are looking for in an object, namely, that it be "authentic", "traditional", and "unique". Causey provides a succinct background to the familiar tourist ethos or desire to experience a world and its inhabitants that is exotic and primitive — in short, that which has had little or no contact with the contaminating effects of modernization. Vendors touting for business tap into this desire through maximum application of limited language skills in the form of uttering key adjectives such as "Majik! Majik!" ("magic") as a strategy to stir potential buyers' interest in items for sale. Indeed, a main goal of souvenir manufacture is the production of "antiques", the essential embodiment of the qualities buyers are seeking. However, vendors are continually nonplussed by the inconsistencies in buying behaviours. Where one traveller will purchase a particular item, another will pass it up. Causey suggests this results from travellers looking for a wide variety of specific objects to fit into their particular versions of this overarching ideology of value. In determining authenticity it is important for them that the objects have a real use — and can thus be designated as authentic — and have not simply been created to satisfy a market for souvenirs. Many potential buyers have, accordingly, become quite savvy and alert to a number of the strategies employed by vendors to present their goods in this light in order to bring about a sale, thus leading to many a session of hard bargaining where each side is prone to misunderstanding and being frustrated by the other as each attempts to "clarify or dispel previous assumptions about their identities while maximizing their own material gains". The end result is a degree of indeterminacy in outcomes and behaviours, which gives this liminal space its transformative properties in so far as it impacts on the forms future carvings will take. With echoes of the Deleuzian notion of "assemblage", Causey coins the term "conflation" to describe the ways in which carvers produce innovations of "traditional" forms, which

are in turn merely a further stage in this process, as they attempt to both pre-empt other carvers with whom they compete for sales, and maintain their own interest in their craft through creating new forms.

One aspect of the work detracting from the import of its conclusions concerns the quality of the data gathered in relation to the travellers. As Causey admits, over the course of his 15 months of research “I found travellers to be tight-lipped” resulting in recourse to data provided by 119 questionnaires which was used to support statements recorded in interviews and hypotheses based on observations of tourists. The lack of depth of these data in comparison to the data gathered in relation to the local inhabitants is reflected in the author’s frequent dependence on the qualifiers “perhaps”, “might”, and “maybe”; frequent speculation and hesitation often replaces rhetoric certainty where travellers are the focus of the discussion, and presents a contrast to the data obtained through the author’s high-quality contact with the local people.

Clifford Geertz once quite rightly remarked, a year or two prior to the time Causey made his initial visit to Lake Toba in 1989, that there are many boring books in anthropology. The ethnography resulting from that visit and subsequent intensive fieldwork, however, cannot be said to number amongst them. This is a well-written examination of an important social and economic phenomenon which deserves a wide readership. I would, accordingly, also highly recommend its inclusion in an undergraduate course in anthropology or Asian studies in general.

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