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The “Authenticity” of Cannibalism: Persisting Nineteenth-century Colonial Perceptions in the Present-day Tourism Dynamic of Lake Toba

Kai Siallagan

Queen's University - Kingston, Ontario, 19kids@queensu.ca

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Abstract

This paper discusses perceptions of the Batak of North Sumatra popular among nineteenth-century European audiences and their continuity in the tourism industry and tourist descriptions. In particular, tourist dynamics in the Batak region of Lake Toba are contextualised and interpreted by identifying how local culture has reacted to tourist demand and tourist depictions of the Batak and their culture. The paper undertakes a historiographical survey of nineteenth-century European writings that ascribe a “violent,” “primitive,” and “cannibalistic” character to the Batak to illustrate prevailing perceptions of the time. These findings are interpreted through a conceptual analysis that integrates Foucauldian discourse theory, Orientalism, Stuart Hall’s “the West and the Rest” as well as some elements of Marxist-Leninist material history. This analysis of modern tourism dynamics in Lake Toba is thus argued to illustrate how colonial perceptions and power relations have maintained currency through tourism.

In the year 1775, a small contingent from the British settlement of Natal of roughly fifty to sixty men marched on a *kampong* (village) in the hinterlands of North Sumatra to bring the local *raja* (chieftain) Niabin to justice. The crime of which Niabin was accused was the murder and cannibalisation of a rival *raja*, whose *kampong* then brought a complaint forward to the British colonial authorities. However, on approaching Niabin’s *kampong*, the leader of the expedition—one Mr. Nairne—was shot in the chest by an unseen assailant, dying instantly. While the

expeditionary force managed to retreat with Nairne's body, two other members of the expedition were likewise killed and themselves eaten by their attackers.

This narrative of events was the one provided to the British authorities by the survivors, as outlined in William Marsden's *History of Sumatra*.¹ In fact, none of those present at the encounter witnessed any act of cannibalism.² Rather, it seems that the injured *kampong* invoked the act of cannibalism to leverage British support for their tribal feud. Secondly, the alleged cannibalisation of the two fallen soldiers appears to have been presumed based on the belief that the people of Niabin's village had a habit of cannibalising dead bodies, likely based on testimony and existing beliefs about the nature of the local inhabitants of the region.³

Such stories about the "cruel" cannibals of the North Sumatran hinterlands had circulated in European imaginations for centuries. By the time Europeans had established a strong colonial hold over the island, the prevalence of cannibalism among the "Battas" was generally viewed as a concrete fact. However, despite abounding stories of these practices in British and Dutch colonial Sumatra, there were very little first-hand European accounts of any act of cannibalisation; "eyewitness" accounts tended to be either second-hand tales, implicit (as in the opening vignette), or exaggerated the viciousness with which the Batak supposedly ate their victims.⁴ In any case, by the nineteenth-century, the European conception of the Batak was generally that of a savage, warlike, and cannibalistic people.

This paper illustrates the persistence of these colonial-era perceptions in the present-day tourist dynamic surrounding the Batak of Lake Toba, North Sumatra. This approach begins by outlining how the Batak were depicted by nineteenth-century Europeans to construct an understanding of the common traits attributed to the Batak during the height of European colonial rule over Sumatra. This portion relies on the analysis of contemporaneous European descriptions of the Batak found in missionary writings, anthropological works, newspaper articles, and several other primary sources. The focus is generally historiographical in that, while these sources describe historical narratives of events, the purpose of analysing these sources is to gain insight into the authors' perceptions. This analysis is complemented by a conceptual framework rooted in cultural theory, Foucauldian "discourses," and Marxist-Leninist literature to help interpret the connections between structures of cultural othering, cultural hegemony, and colonial domination with relation to the Batak. This framework provides a tool for interpreting and deciphering the modern tourist dynamic in Lake Toba and its reflection of historical, colonial relations. Present-day tourist-local relationships in the region are argued to reproduce historical perceptions of the Indigenous peoples therein.

COLONIAL-ERA PERCEPTIONS

¹ William Marsden, *History of Sumatra: Containing an Account of the Government, Laws, Customs, And Manners of the Native Inhabitants, with a Description of the Natural Productions, and a Relation of the Ancient Political State of That Island*, 3rd ed., (London: J. McCreery, 1811), 394-395.

² Masashi Hirose, "European Travellers and Local Informants in the Making of the Image of 'Cannibalism' in North Sumatra," *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Toyo Bunko*, no. 63 (2005), 52-53.

³ Hirose, "European Travellers and Local Informants."

⁴ Hirose, "European Travellers and Local Informants," 44-45, 52-56.

The term “Batak” describes several related groups of people that reside primarily in the inland regions of North Sumatra, commonly demarcated as the Toba, Karo, Pakpak-Dairi, Simalungun, Angkola, and sometimes Mandailing.⁵ The Batak as an ethnic category is often historically differentiated from other Sumatran ethnicities such as the Malay or the Acehnese by several factors, including their general lack of coastal settlement, the historical persistence of traditional spiritual practices in contrast with their Islamised neighbours, and their unique language and writing system.⁶ In principle, all these elements underscore how Batak isolation helped develop and maintain a cultural history distinct from their coastal neighbours.⁷ In fact, the isolation of the Batak and their purported cannibalism may have gone hand-in-hand; many European travellers and, later, colonial officers seem to have been reluctant to venture into Batak land out of fear of the Batak cannibals, and, simultaneously, the enduring image of the Batak cannibal may have been the product of local efforts to maintain Batak isolation for trade or political purposes.⁸ It is also conceivable that the physical (geographical) and social (interactive) distance between Europeans and the Batak may also have contributed to beliefs about a cultural or moral distance between the two, meaning the non-cosmopolitan Batak society were assumed to be devoid of hospitality and rule of law. It is important not to overstate this isolationism; as Andaya points out, the Batak had always been involved in historical regional developments.⁹ However, in contrast with their coastal neighbours, the Batak did experience a relative degree of geographical and cultural isolation, which was an important factor in their development as a unique ethnic category.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the Dutch consolidated their control over the island of Sumatra. This century saw an increase in the direct management of the island’s affairs by the Dutch colonial administration, as well as the gradual decline of autonomous Indigenous kingdoms, such as the Sultanate of Aceh. The waxing power of Europe over the East Indies in conjunction with growing interests in anthropology and ethnographic documentation resulted in the production of a great deal of European records from a variety of sources on the Batak.¹⁰ Additionally, as will be discussed, this period saw the rise of racialized thinking in Western society, likely colouring descriptions of the Batak along preconceived ideas of race and culture. Consequently, the nineteenth century provides a valuable setting for the analysis of colonial European conceptualisations of Batak culture and society.

European accounts of the Batak often differed in attitude and, occasionally, in basic facts, but certain elements and characterisations underscored virtually all European descriptions. The basic character of the nineteenth-century European’s “Batak” was usually defined as violent, primitive, and cannibalistic in nature. More importantly, cannibalism became the most important

⁵ Leonard Y. Andaya, “The Trans-Sumatran Trade and the Ethnicization of the ‘Batak’,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land-, en Volkenkunde* 158, no. 8 (2002): 369. The usage of the term “Batak” is not preferred by some groups and is most commonly associated specifically with the Toba. Nevertheless, “Batak” is the preferred term in this paper due to its usage and connotations in historical and colonial sources.

⁶ Today, Christianity and Islam have largely supplanted traditional spiritual practices in most Batak regions, but this change is relatively recent.

⁷ Andaya, “The Trans-Sumatran Trade and the Ethnicization of the ‘Batak’,” 367-404.

⁸ Andaya, “The Trans-Sumatran Trade and the Ethnicization of the ‘Batak’,” 367-368; Burton and Ward, “Report of a Journey into the Batak Country, in the Interior of Sumatra, in the Year 1824,” *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1, no. 2 (1826): 485-513; Hirosue, “European Travellers and Local Informants.”

⁹ Andaya, “The Trans-Sumatran Trade and the Ethnicization of the ‘Batak’,” 367-404.

¹⁰ Andaya, “The Trans-Sumatran Trade and the Ethnicization of the ‘Batak’,” 369.

label with which the Batak came to be defined in that “cannibal” and its negative associations tended to supersede other, perhaps more positive characteristics. As Masashi Hirose notes, many of the European records on the Batak relied on second-hand information, including that of Marsden whose work on the Batak was heavily cited by contemporaneous scholars of Sumatran anthropology.¹¹

What is likely the first known European account of the Batak people or a predecessor thereof is that of Marco Polo in which he describes a people residing in “Lesser Java” (Sumatra) who are “all idolators . . . [and the] inhabitants of the mountains are like beasts, for . . . they eat human flesh.”¹² In this passage, Marco Polo makes an important distinction between those living on the coasts or cities as following “the Law of Mahomet” (Islam) and those aforementioned highlanders who “worship the most varied things.”¹³ This latter people can be presumed to be the Batak or a predecessor, among whom, unlike the peoples of coastal Sumatra, there was little penetration of Islamic influence. Similar accounts of the cannibalistic and “beast-like” nature of the Batak are present in the records of other early European explorers, including Venetian merchant Nicolò de’ Conti (1449),¹⁴ trader Tomé Pires (1510s),¹⁵ traveller João de Barros (1563),¹⁶ and French Commodore Augustin de Beaulieu (1621).¹⁷ While it is notable that none of these accounts were first-hand, this paper is concerned more with the images of the Batak produced by Europeans rather than the validity of these accounts.¹⁸

Thus, by the nineteenth century, Europeans and, in particular, colonial administrations in the East Indies were acutely aware of the supposed cannibals residing in the hinterlands of Sumatra. Perhaps one of the most foundational and oft-cited among nineteenth century accounts is William Marsden’s *History of Sumatra*. Marsden first alludes to the “most extraordinary” Batak custom of eating human flesh when citing the personal letters of the earlier explorer Charles Miller who had visited western Batak lands in 1772. Miller notes that, “in the sapiyau or building . . . we saw a man’s skull hanging up . . . whose body (according to the custom of the Battas) they [the local Batak] had eaten about two months before.”¹⁹ Marsden later devotes an entire section to the discussion of this “diabolical” tradition where he claims that Batak cannibalism is used, in part, as “a savage display of revenge and insult to their unfortunate enemies.”²⁰ In the same vein, Marsden relates detailed (second-hand) descriptions of the ways in which the Batak devour human flesh

¹¹ Hirose, “European Travellers and Local Informants,” 44; Marsden, *History of Sumatra*, 392.

¹² Marco Polo, in Edward Denison Ross and Eileen Power, eds., *The Travels of Marco Polo*, trans. Aldo Ricci (London: Routledge, 1926), 282.

¹³ Marco Polo, in Ross and Power, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 282.

¹⁴ R. H. Major, ed., “The Travels of Nicolò Conti, in the East,” *India in the Fifteenth Century: Narratives of Voyages to India* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1857), 9.

¹⁵ Tomé Pires, in Hakluyt Society, *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires and the Book of Francisco Rodrigues* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1944), 145-146.

¹⁶ João de Barros, *Décadas da Ásia*, quoted in Mark Dion, “Sumatra through Portuguese Eyes: Excerpts from João de Barros’s ‘Decadas da Asia’,” *Indonesia*, no. 9 (1970): 143.

¹⁷ Augustin de Beaulieu, in J. Harris, ed., “The Expedition of Commodore Beaulieu to the East Indies,” *Navigantium atque Itinerantium Bibliotheca: A Complete Collection of Voyages and Travels* (London: 1744).

¹⁸ Hirose, “European Travellers and Local Informants,” 44.

¹⁹ Marsden, *History of Sumatra*, 370.

²⁰ Marsden, *History of Sumatra*, 391.

“with a degree of savage enthusiasm” and remarks how such “depravity” is endemic to the Batak as a consequence of their lack of “religion and philosophy.”²¹

Marsden’s characterisation of the Batak as “savage,” based largely on second-hand accounts, often conflicts with other observations about Batak society and customs. For instance, on the topic of Batak marriage customs, Marsden says:

The men are allowed to marry as many wives as they please, or can afford, and to have half a dozen is not uncommon. Each of these sits in a different part of the large room, and sleeps exposed to the others; not being separated by any partition or distinction of apartments. Yet the husband finds it necessary to allot to each of them their several fireplaces and cooking utensils, where they dress their own victuals separately, and prepare his in turns. How is this domestic state and the flimsiness of such an imaginary barrier to be reconciled with our ideas of the furious, ungovernable passions of love and jealousy supposed to prevail in an eastern harem? Or must custom be allowed to supersede all other influence, both moral and physical?²²

Marsden seems confused as to how this race of people who supposedly eat their enemies and “enslave” their women could simultaneously demonstrate ordered social formations and apparent adherence to a code of respect based in custom.²³ Likewise, the existence of widespread literacy and endogenous art forms—also mentioned in Marsden’s *History*—appear to contradict common beliefs among Europeans at the time; the cannibal is presumed to occupy the space of a “pre-civilised” human who lacks the amenities of philosophy, diligence, morality, and innovation reserved for the “civilised” person, and so it is surprising the “cannibalistic” Batak—who are assumed to be predisposed a “primitive” existence—instead demonstrate a definite sense of and adherence to the rule of law, can maintain complex social formations, and display faculties of reason.²⁴

Missionary records constitute another stream of interesting information on the Batak, particularly for their tendency to use moralising language. English missionary John T. Beighton wrote a series of newspaper columns on the “horrible savageness” of the Batak of Sumatra in the year 1889. The paper in which these articles were published was the *Sunday at Home: A Family Magazine for Sabbath Reading*, a periodical published by London’s evangelical Religious Tract Society. In one article, Beighton belabours the Batak’s cannibalistic appetite and characterises the Batak as “[having] a craving for human flesh” yet was “probably always ashamed of his [*sic*] propensity [thereto].”²⁵ According to Beighton, cannibalism was a vice inherent to Batak society and culture. The overall tone of his writings indicates a paternalistic attitude towards the Batak whereby cannibalism was seen as a plight produced by a backwards, uncivilised, and “pagan” culture that could be remedied by introducing Christian morality. This attitude is seen in another article of the same series where Beighton illustrates how Christianity acts as a means of reforming

²¹ Marsden, *History of Sumatra*, 392.

²² Marsden, *History of Sumatra*, 381-382.

²³ Marsden uses this terminology to describe gender relations among the Batak.

²⁴ Stuart Hall, “The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power [1992],” *Essential Essays*, ed. David Morley (Durham, ON: Duke University Press, 2019), 168-170.

²⁵ John T. Beighton, “The Battahs of Sumatra. A New Chapter in Missionary Annals, III,” *Sunday at Home*, no. 1840 (August 3, 1889): 492.

the Batak person and their “defects”: “Christians had rescued him [a Batak cannibal] from cruel slavery.”²⁶

Another well-known European source on the Batak comes from the accounts of British Baptist missionaries Burton and Ward in 1824. Burton and Ward’s account contrasts with others in that they provide a generally favourable account of the Batak. They recurrently remark as to the hospitality, cleanliness, and “vivacity” of the communities they had visited. Like Marsden, Burton and Ward seem somewhat surprised as to their experiences with the Batak:

Nothing can be more erroneous than the opinions commonly entertained by the Malays, in their neighbourhood as well as by Europeans, with regard to the general character and disposition of the Bataks. The well-established fact of their cannibalism has, perhaps, naturally led to the conclusion, that they were a remarkably ferocious and daring people. So strongly, indeed, had this impression taken hold of our minds, that although a residence of two years on the border of their country had furnished nothing to confirm the opinion, we still expected to find proofs of it in the interior. So far from this, however, whatever may be the fact with respect to other districts, the people of Silindung, in quietness and timidity, are apparently not surpassed even by the Hindus.²⁷

Evidently, the pair were expecting, based on popular accounts of the coastal peoples of Sumatra as well as of Europeans, to find a violent and aggressive people. However, while Burton and Ward’s testimony is generally more positive than that of Marsden or Beighton, they nonetheless later reaffirm that the Batak were capable of “extreme unfeelingness and cruelty” and afflicted by cowardice and greed.²⁸ Additionally, even in the generally favourable light presented by Burton and Ward, there still exists the same underlying assumptions about the savagery and primitiveness of the Batak as well as the “well-established fact of their cannibalism.”

These accounts illustrate widespread beliefs among Europeans of the nineteenth century that the Batak were a cannibalistic race, often also described as having a violent or uncivilised nature. While each source offers a somewhat different perspective, all agree on the prevalence of cannibalism among the Batak and assume their inherent propensity towards violence. This image, whether accurate or not, had thus become the prevailing description of the Batak by the height of European dominance in Sumatra.

CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

In more recent history, the growth of global tourism as a social, cultural, and economic phenomenon has led scholars to take a greater interest in the consequences and impacts of tourism within the broader paradigm of economic development and cultural exchange.²⁹ This paper takes a particular interest how modern tourism ties to historical expressions of colonialism and processes

²⁶ John T. Beighton, “The Battahs of Sumatra. A New Chapter in Missionary Annals, IV,” *Sunday at Home*, no. 1845 (September 7, 1889): 570.

²⁷ Burton and Ward, “Report of a Journey into the Batak Country,” 498.

²⁸ Burton and Ward, “Report of a Journey into the Batak Country,” 499.

²⁹ Asif Khan et al., “Tourism and Development in Developing Economies: A Policy Implication Perspective,” *Sustainability* 12, no. 4 (2020): 1-2, doi: 10.3390/su12041618.

of cultural othering. Tourism necessarily implies venturing beyond the familiar to the exotic and, therefore, requires a conception of the border between the two realms. Anthropologists and cultural scholars generally hold that such borders are not intrinsic in the fabric of society, but rather constructed. Therefore, understanding the origins of these borders is essential to understanding the origins of modern tourism.

The ossification of the image of the Batak cannibal in the European imagination can be conceptualised through Edward Said's discourse on Orientalism. According to Said, "the Orient" is a constructed category whose identity is ascribed by an externally-imposed and reductive gaze that asserts an inherent cultural superiority of the West.³⁰ In this sense, both "the West" and the non-West are necessarily constructed categories which act as foils to one another; the non-West ("the Rest" in Stuart Hall's terms) is superstitious, stagnant, primitive, and chaotic whereas "the West" is rational, innovative, dynamic, and orderly.³¹ Hall builds on Said by expanding the borders of Orientalism to encompass the entirety of the non-West and argues that "the West" arose principally as a marker of differentiation and hierarchy with relation to "the Rest."³²

Orientalism is often described along the Foucauldian notion of "discourse." Discourse, to Foucault, meant interpreting a given set of ideas, statements, or conventions as a complex interplay of truth, knowledge, and power.³³ More specifically, control over knowledge production and defining what is "true" serves as a stage upon which power dynamics unfold, as well as a vehicle for flows of power and control. Orientalism exerts power by shaping conceptions of truth, which in turn defines actions and reality. Western Orientalist preconceptions become "truths" through the diffusion of a hegemonic ideology to subaltern groups through a power gradient.³⁴ In colonial relationships, the colonised adopts key assumptions of the colonist, hence records of the Batak themselves reproducing and perhaps even exaggerating stereotypes of cannibalism and violence with the arrival of European rule.³⁵

Thus, in a sense, by "creating" knowledge of the Batak—i.e., the many "historical" accounts of the cannibals of the North Sumatran hinterlands—colonial-era Europeans effectively invented the savage, the cannibal, and the Batak therein. The particular terminology here is consequential. Because cannibalism is seen as far removed from Christian morality, the label "cannibal" implicitly carries negative connotations among Europeans. It became a signifier for the "savage," "backwards," "primitive," "violent," and, in general, for the colonised subject who fails to conform to Western ideas of civilisation.³⁶ In essence, the cannibal represents the epitome of the Other or "the Rest." The surprise of nineteenth-century Europeans whose interactions with Batak had contradicted their assumptions highlights the prevalence of such assumptions about this supposedly cannibalistic people.

Frantz Fanon describes tourism as an industry that arises from the national bourgeoisie's attempts to commodify the nation's cultural resources to bolster the incipient economy of the

³⁰ Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia, *Edward Said* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 47-48.

³¹ Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, *Edward Said*, 49; Hall, "The West and the Rest," 143-145, 170-171.

³² Hall, "The West and the Rest," 142-145.

³³ Sara Mills, *Michel Foucault* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 54, 57, 67-70, 74; Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, *Edward Said*, 60-62; Hall, "The West and the Rest," 156-161.

³⁴ Antonio Gramsci, in David Forgacs, ed., *An Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916- 1935* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1988), 189-221.

³⁵ As seen in Hirosue, "European Travellers and Local Informants," 52-56.

³⁶ Hall, "The West and the Rest," 168-173.

newly-independent colony.³⁷ Culture, he continues, becomes a commodity to be consumed by tourists from the former metropole.³⁸ This commodification rests in Orientalism; because Orientalist discourse creates a generally-accepted paradigm of what constitutes the exotic, the local and their culture is made a commodity by virtue of their perceived novelty. Consequently, the exploitation of the Indigene's labour and natural resources by the defunct colonial system evolves into the cultural exploitation of the local by the tourist, especially those from the former metropolitan centres in Europe and North America.³⁹

At the heart of this discussion is the reimagined colony-metropole dichotomy in which the Indigene becomes the local and the metropolitan colonist becomes the tourist. These designations exist upon a cultural landscape in which the concept of what constitutes a "proper local" is defined in terms of Orientalist conceptualisations of the Indigene. In other words, under the tourist regime the local is expected to fulfill Orientalist expectations of "authentic" Indigenous culture. Of course, what is considered authentic is determined asymmetrically by colonist-tourist perceptions. Authenticity is therefore a discourse in itself negotiated between lived histories and tourists' perceptions thereof. Renato Rosaldo uses the term "imperial nostalgia" to describe this subconscious fantasy of the former colonist to explore the authentic or, specifically, the supposed precolonial culture of a colonised people.⁴⁰ Thus, the modern tourist satisfies their nostalgia through the discovery and exploration of unfamiliar societies off the beaten path. Finally, it is important to note that the tourist, reminiscent of former colonial relationships, tends to hold a position of dominance over the local due to disparities in control over capital and an uneven dependency relationship; the tourist exists in a tourism space out of desire, whereas the local exists there out of necessity.

Tourism and colonialism therefore share a common conceptual basis in Orientalist discourse. The local and the tourist exist in an uneven relationship whereby the tourist demands authenticity in line with preconceived notions of what constitutes authentic or precolonial Indigenous culture. In the case of the Batak, authenticity involves notions of savagery, violence, primitiveness, and cannibalism. As such, the modern relationship between the tourist and the local not only reflects power disparities present in the former colonial regime but also reproduces historical perceptions.

PRESENT-DAY TOURISM IN LAKE TOBA

This paper examines the relationship between the Batak and Western tourism practices as seen in Lake Toba, a region central to the Batak homelands. Lake Toba serves as a useful case study because it is considered one of Indonesia's most active and economically valuable tourist

³⁷ Frantz Fanon, "The Trials and Tribulations of National Consciousness," *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2004), 64-80.

³⁸ In a general sense, Fanon's analysis is limited as tourists come from many places, including other former colonies. Nonetheless, his work serves as an interesting analytical tool for examining the relationship between specifically the former colony and the former metropole in a tourist dynamic.

³⁹ See also Eric McGukin, "Travelling Paradigms: Marxism, Poststructuralism and the Uses of Theory," *Anthropologica* 47, no. 1 (2005): 67-79.

⁴⁰ Renato Rosaldo, "Imperial Nostalgia," *Representations*, no. 26 (Spring, 1989): 107-110.

locations, largely for its local cultural attractions and scenery.⁴¹ Furthermore, Indonesian President Joko Widodo has recently been discussing plans for further development of the region's tourism industry.⁴² As a consequence, Lake Toba represents a significant site of interactions between the tourist and the local. Analysis of these interactions highlights the colonial perceptions and Orientalist discourse unfolding in the modern tourist dynamic.

This paper uses "tourism" according to the conceptual discussion outlined earlier, i.e., as a phenomenon emergent as a natural consequence of colonialism and the commodification of colonised cultures. Therefore, tourism has an inherently modern inflection, originating in Batak history at earliest in 1949 (Indonesian Independence) according to Fanon's assessment of the emergence of the postcolonial tourism industry. There are notable references to tourism in the region relatively soon after Independence, such as a 1961 journal article that notes "Prapat" (Parapat, east Lake Toba) as being an important Indonesian resort town.⁴³ Similarly, a 1972 *New York Times* article titled "A cannibal past and a Christian present" provides information on lodgings and travel expenses for visits to see Lake Toba and its cannibals-turned-Christian.⁴⁴ However, for a more concise analysis, this paper focuses primarily on tourism-related primary and secondary resources from roughly the past three decades, i.e., since the 1990s.

Rithaony Hutajulu has conducted extensive work in the ways in which Batak ceremony has reacted to the burgeoning tourism industry. Echoing Orientalist discourse, he discusses how the traditional religious buffalo-slaughtering ceremony (*Mandudu*) was reinvented "to make it more like a theatrical performance" to appeal to tourists' "search for authenticity and the exotic."⁴⁵ Such rituals were even subsidised by the government to enhance the region's tourism industry. While Hutajulu suggests that some of the more violent features of the traditional ceremony were erased or "tuned-down" to avoid the aforementioned "savage" or "cannibalistic" stereotypes, the popularity of the violent act of animal slaughter among tourists seems to highlight expectations of the locals' "authentic" innate violence.

Andrew Causey similarly documented ways in which traditional wood carving art forms were reimagined in post-independence Indonesia in response to the demands of souvenir-seeking tourists. In an article published in 2000, he discusses his relationship with a Batak wood carver who, like many wood carvers in the Lake Toba region, specialised in producing souvenirs for Western tourists. Causey relates how Partoho (his friend and carving mentor) had to negotiate traditional styles with Western tastes because "tourists tend to want souvenirs that somehow reference 'authentic' Toba Batak culture" where "authenticity" means "pre-Christian", "pre-technological," and often based on preconceptions rather than informed understandings of what actually constitutes traditional forms.⁴⁶ Ironically, since carvers must adapt to consumer demand, misconceptions among Western tourists about what constitutes "authentic" style may have actually caused drift from traditional art styles. Causey also notes how Batak carving tradition was

⁴¹ Indonesia, "Lake Toba," *Indonesia Travel*. <https://www.indonesia.travel/gb/en/destinations/sumatra/lake-toba>.

⁴² Joko Susilo, "Jokowi to transform Lake Toba into tourist spot," *Antara*, July 31, 2019.

⁴³ William A. Withington, "Upland Resorts and Tourism in Indonesia: Some Recent Trends," *Geographical Review* 51, no. 3 (July, 1961): 420.

⁴⁴ Joan Ogden, "A cannibal past and Christian present," *New York Times*, May 28, 1972.

⁴⁵ Rithaony Hutajulu, "Tourism's Impact on Toba Batak Ceremony," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* (1995): 647-648.

⁴⁶ Andrew Causey, "The Folder in the Drawer of the Sky Blue Lemari: A Toba Batak Carver's Secrets," *Crossroads* 14, no. 1 (2000): 16, 18-19.

disrupted by colonialism, both by the growth of Christianity among the Toba Batak—dissuading traditional, “animist” art forms—as well as the outmigration of traditional cultural objects to Western collectors.⁴⁷ Consequently, not only were local carvers pressured to adapt to tourists’ demands, but they often had to entirely reinvent the tradition of carving based on Western sources and documentation of Batak objects found in books and other resources. Causey’s discussion more indirectly illustrates how Westerners’ perceptions colour the cultural fabric of present-day Lake Toba, as well as the position of cultural authority held by the Western tourist. The tourist search for precolonial culture also highlights the persistence of exploratory colonial mindsets *per* Rosaldo’s “imperial nostalgia” and, by extension, the Western conception of “authentic” Batak society as preindustrial, premodern, and animist.⁴⁸

Beyond scholarly resources, examining online tourist accounts of Lake Toba provides a second channel of insight through what are essentially primary sources. These resources may include, for instance, tourists’ reviews as taken from notable tourist websites such as TripAdvisor or Google, as well as accounts from travel blogs or opinion articles. A particularly striking example of persisting colonial conceptions of the Batak is *Huta Siallagan* (“Siallagan village” or occasionally “fort Siallagan”)—a popular tourist site in east Samosir—which has been described as “once the scene of grisly beheadings,”⁴⁹ or “A glimpse of Batakese’ [*sic*] barbaric past” on various tourism websites.⁵⁰ One Google review compares historical Batak society to that of medieval Europe, describing it as “very sadistic with punishment in the dark ages,” whereas another describes the site as “stone age.”⁵¹ The site itself consists of a collection of *bolon* (traditional-style) houses with a conspicuous stone structure more or less analogous to a judicial court. Here, judicial affairs were arbitrated by the local *raja* and council, including execution by beheading and, supposedly, cannibalisations of the accused. Descriptions also tend to gloss over the adherence to a legal code and legal procedure, instead emphasising the aspects related to punishment. Because of this history, *Huta Siallagan* serves as a particularly dramatic representation of the “violent Batak” where, in line with nineteenth-century depictions, tourist descriptions tend to emphasise the violence and “primitiveness” of the site’s historical punishment methods as well as make references to the practice of cannibalism. In some cases, these “savage” practices are explicitly juxtaposed with “civilised” Western culture, as in one article claiming that the local community’s “sadistic” practices—execution and purported cannibalism—ended “when Christianity began to enter [the region] and was introduced by a German missionary.”⁵² A similar

⁴⁷ Causey, “The Folder in the Drawer of the Sky Blue Lemari, 20-22.

⁴⁸ Rosaldo, “Imperial Nostalgia,” 107-110.

⁴⁹ Carol H, October 15, 2018, review on “King Siallagan’s Stone Chair,” *Tripadvisor*, n.d., https://www.tripadvisor.ca/ShowUserReviews-g3187028-d3949197-r498033846-King_Siallagan_s_Stone_Chair-Ambarita_Samosir_Island_North_Sumatra_Sumatra.html.

⁵⁰ Ping L, April 25, 2017, review on “King Siallagan’s Stone Chair,” *Tripadvisor*.

⁵¹ Ivar Gosman, review on “Batu Kursi Raja Siallagan (Stone Chair of King Siallagan),” *Google*, n.d., [https://www.google.com.my/travel/entity/key/ChgI2d-Il6iH4w0aDS9nLzExcmo1a245enQQBA/reviews?ei=yFVYYtzFH8Wh9wTw5K_4Dg&sa=X&ts=CAESABoECgIaACoECgAaAA&ved=0CAAQ5JsGahcKEwiIoMeRj4P4AhUAAAAAHQAAAAAQJg](https://www.google.com.my/travel/entity/key/ChkIs8-MqLmQt906Gg0vZy8xMWJ3dGRwY3lrEAQ/reviews?sa=X&utm_campaign=sharing&utm_medium=link&utm_source=htls&ts=CAESABoECgIaACoECgAaAA&ved=0CAAQ5JsGahcKEwjwwcGej4P4AhUAAAAAHQAAAAhUA; Frans A. Wijaya, review on “Huta Siallagan,” <i>Google</i>, n.d., <a href=).

⁵² ASEAN, “Huta Siallagan, the Legendary Old Village on Samosir Island,” *IndonesiaR*, November 24, 2020, <https://indonesiar.com/huta-siallagan-the-legendary-old-village-on-samosir-island>. ASEAN is the username of the author and is not affiliated with the economic union.

belief is echoed by a user whose tour guide associated the introduction of Christianity with the end of “terrible” cannibalism practices.⁵³

Of course, stories of the “grisly beheadings” and “sadistic practices” are reinforced by local tour guides, whose narratives use colourful imagery to entice the exploratory minds of tourists. One review, for instance, notes how the tour guide seemed “fixated on the gruesome details” and the methods of execution.⁵⁴ Accounts of the exact details of execution and cannibalisation tend to vary substantially, with one user claiming the Batak “dr[a]nk their [victims’] blood” while another asserts that the victim would be “sliced and rubbed with garlic and chilli” prior to being cannibalised.⁵⁵ The wide variation and the sensationalism of these descriptions seems to be derived partly from tourists’ imaginations and partly from the narratives provided by local tour guides; it is not necessarily important for a tour guide to provide a standardised nor even accurate account of the history of the site, but rather to appeal to the tourist’s imaginations and preconceptions as to how precolonial, pre-Christian Batak society operated. The tourist’s search for authenticity thus produces a narrative that arises from their own preconceptions of history as well as the responsiveness of the local to the tourist’s demands.

CONCLUSION

These examples illustrate specific modern-day manifestations of colonial-era descriptors such as “violent,” “savage,” and “cannibal” with relation to the Batak as well as the reproduction of these tropes by both tourists and locals. The power of Orientalist discourse here rests in the hegemonic power exerted by the tourist as a product of colonial histories and power dynamics. Admittedly, the Batak seem to be generally better understood today, especially in the West, compared to the nineteenth century audiences; they are no longer defined principally by their alleged cannibalistic history. Nevertheless, the allure of the “savagery” and “cannibalistic nature” of the Batak continues to be used as a selling point to Western tourists. Thus, there is a unique currency of Orientalist attitudes and their relationships to colonialism expressed through tourism and its impacts on Indigenous culture and livelihoods.

While there is an abundance of work in the fields of development studies and economics on the utility of tourism as a tool of economic growth and regional or national development, it is important to contextualise tourism as a phenomenon within broader historical settings. Tourism is not a one-dimensional process through which economies develop, but rather a complex, multidimensional matrix underscored by a history of colonial power relations. Ultimately, the study of modern tourism is an evolving field with many facets to be further explored. Tourism can, of course, be beneficial to socio-economic development, but it is also important to maintain a critical posture towards these histories when assessing the outcomes of tourism industry and to be

⁵³ Hadie A, May 9, 2015, review on “Tomb of the Sidabutar Kings,” *Tripadvisor*, n.d., https://www.tripadvisor.ca/Attraction_Review-g303958-d3949191-Reviews-or90-Tomb_of_the_Sidabutar_Kings-Samosir_Island_North_Sumatra_Sumatra.html.

⁵⁴ Maxwell_1984, August 19, 2019, review on “King Siallagan’s Stone Chair,” *Tripadvisor*.

⁵⁵ Sih1688, review on “Batu Kursi Raja Siallagan,” *Google*; Dr Igor, review on “Batu Kursi Raja Siallagan,” *Google*.

aware of the potential consequences for cultural exchange and development among Indigenous groups.

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