My carving teacher, his wife, and their children were seated on the brightly colored woven mat, and they asked me to tell them how I first came to visit Samosir Island. They had heard the story before, but wanted to hear it again to savor the images of confusion, of delight, of anger. So I told them the story again, starting at the very beginning.

I first came to North Sumatra, Indonesia, as a tourist in 1989. Like many others, I had worked at a job I didn’t really like in order to save enough money to make the trip. And like many others, I was ill-prepared for the journey: I did not speak the language, I had an unclear itinerary, and knew very little about the cultures I was going to visit. Nevertheless, the trip from Los Angeles to Medan is a long one, and it gave me plenty of time to read through the two guidebooks I was carrying. The glossy color photographs I saw reaffirmed one thing for me—I would visit the huge crater lake, Toba, and the mountain island that rose up from its midst. This was the land of the Toba Bataks, the people (as I read in the book) who had been isolated from the world for centuries, and who were rumored to have once been cannibals.

I knew a little about the Toba Bataks before I began my journey, but not very much. I had seen examples of their carvings at a museum and was drawn to the simplicity of their lines and the strength of their forms. After touring the gallery, I had a great desire to possess such carvings of my own: lustrous black figures worn smooth by decades of use. The guidebook told me that artisans were still producing traditional objects, but I imagined myself cherishing something ancient, polished with eons of sweat and smoke. In a pinch, I told myself, I would be content with something new.
Once on Sumatran soil, I felt dazed and unfocused. I had done a terrible job of memorizing the simple phrases outlined in the guidebook, and the blur of words, magnified by the stifling heat of the coastal city of Medan, made me feel defensive and confused. Still, the people I met were earnestly friendly and tried to talk to me using English words, which calmed me. When I finally arrived at the lakeside tourist town Parapat, I was beginning to feel comfortable with my situation. Traveling alone in a strange country, I convinced myself, would provide for me a kind of emancipation, for I would find an inner strength that would allow me not only to take care of myself but to grow.

I spent a week on Samosir, the island in the lake, finding ways to communicate with local people, photographing their grandly decorated homes and verdant fields, and exploring the tourist marketplaces. I found a few souvenirs to buy in the stalls, but was disappointed that all the real antiques seemed to be gone. On the day before I was to leave Samosir and travel to the island of Java, I made one last search for the dark, burnished objects I desired. I was poking around behind leather bags and below racks of hanging T-shirts when a smiling vendor came up to me, saying in heavily accented English, “You want antiques?” There was no time left for me to be distant or vague with her in the hope that my casual attitude would help in the bargaining session. With wild eyes, I told her, yes, I was looking for antiques, at which point she escorted me to a traditional home not far from the market.

Despite the fact that it was a clear sunny day, it was very dark inside the old house, for it was brightened only by a small open window. “Wait here,” she said, “I will get my husband. He has antiques; he will sell you antiques.” As I waited in the dark, I squinted my eyes to better see where I was. The room was wide and spacious, with no furnishings except the woven mat on which I was sitting. I reached my hand out to feel the cool floor, consisting of huge worn planks that glowed dully with the reflected light from the window. As my eyes adjusted to the dark, I began to see that every wall was hung with carvings. There were water-buffalo horns with masklike stoppers. There were black walking sticks decorated with creatures standing on one another’s backs. There were ornate
sheathed knives and staring human figures, elegant covered vessels and oblong mandolins. And all of them sang to me of their wonderful age—I had found the antiques!

A middle-aged man entered the main room from behind a curtain, introduced himself to me in English, and sat down on the mat with me. He told me that he had been gathering these objects for years. Although they were his own private collection, he said he would be willing to sell one or two of them because he saw I had an interest in the culture of his ancestors. He showed me many things and told me the stories that explained how they had been used and why they were rare. His wife brought hot tea for us to drink as we chatted, but I do not know how long we sat there talking. I selected an object from his collection that I was intimately drawn to: a carved box with a saddle-shaped lid. He wanted a great deal of money for this antique, but we negotiated and compromised, and he lovingly wrapped the carving in paper. It was a high price to pay, but I now owned one of the glossy old objects with which I had become obsessed. As I left the old house, he invited me to come visit him again whenever I returned.

I had no time to gloat over my new possession, for the ferry to the mainland was ready to go. I crammed the box in my backpack and raced off to the dock. In Parapat, I rushed to catch the bus to the airport in Medan, and in a few hours I was in Java. Compared to the bright clear light and the cool fresh breezes of North Sumatra's mountains, Jakarta was an insult to the senses. All I could find was a poorly ventilated cell in a shabby hotel, and all I wanted was to return to Lake Toba. I opened my bag, pining for the highlands, and found my antique. Now I could admire it, could feel the shine of its aged patina, could revel in the intricacy of its design. Ahhhh, the box was beautiful. In addition to the elaborate interlocking surface details, it had the head of a delightful snakelike creature at one end of the lid. It smelled musky from the centuries of tobacco that had been stored in it. I turned the box over to see if there were figures or engravings on the bottom, but there was nothing. "What's this stuff?" I asked myself as I prodded my fingernail into a crevice. It was brown and came loose as I picked at it. "Huh. I guess it's dirt," I thought, trying to reassure myself. But when I took the box over
to the bare bulb sticking out of the hotel room’s wall, I saw that the wood underneath the substance was nearly white with fresh little splinters sticking up.

Frantically, I looked at the other cracks and fissures. There too was the dark substance. If I picked it and rubbed it between my fingers, it stained them; it had a distinct petroleum-based scent. I knew now that I had been had.

My antique was a fake. I had bought something worth nothing. I fumed, then put the box and the lid down carelessly on the cot and left the room to find a beer and some solace or distraction. How could I have been so foolish? How could I not have seen that I was being set up? How had my eye for the real, my taste for the venerable, if nothing else my penuriousness... how could they all have failed me? The box went to the bottom of my bag for the rest of the trip. I was angry at it and at the people who had made it, and I did not really care whether I was careful with it or not.

I bought many other things on my trip—batik sarongs, grimacing masks, and ballpoint pens made to look like Javanese puppets—but when I unpacked them all once I was home again, the Batak carving was still my favorite. Back home, it did not seem to matter so much that the box was masquerading as an heirloom from the time of the Batak ancestors, for I now began to see in it an integrity of character and honesty of design that could not be masked with shoe polish.

Partoho, Ito, and their seven children all stared at me long after the story had ended. Ito clicked her tongue, saying: “They cheated you and you still came back here. You were drawn back here to do your research years later for a reason.” She nodded her head at me as if we both accepted the inevitability of fate.

“Maybe,” Partoho added. “But I hope you didn’t return to get your money back from the man in the old house, because he moved to Medan long ago, and no one has heard from him since!” He turned to me to say, “You’ll have to keep that box, Andru. Too bad for you!” Ito let out an exasperated sigh at her husband’s little joke, then rose to heat up some more tea.

I had only been back in the cozy home of Partoho and Ito for an hour and we had already recovered our comfortable pattern of conversation. I
had been gone from the village Huta Mungkap, where Ito and her hus-
band Partoho lived, for four months and was now returning to finish my
fieldwork. As I stepped off the boat, Ito stopped in the path when she saw
me coming toward her house. She was covering her laughing mouth, and
as I got closer I could hear her saying, “Aduh! Lihatlah! Lihat Andru yang
GEMUK seperti bosnya!” (“Wow! Just look! Look at Andrew who is fat
like a boss!”). She called out to Partoho and her children that a “big boss”
was coming down the path. They all stood exactly where they were, smil-
ing and asking how I could have put on so much weight (ten pounds) in
so little time, telling me that if I was to live in Huta Mungkap again, I
must go back to eating “farmer food”: rice and fish and chili sauce. “You’ll
look like a Batak farmer again in no time,” she told me.

Partoho invited me into the house where we could sit down, have a
glass of hot sugared tea and a kretek (I: clove cigarette), and talk. Sharp
words were spoken to a pair of children who were lounging in front of the
black-and-white television set trying to make sense out of an undubbed
American cartoon as it slowly flipped on the dim screen. They snapped
the machine off and rolled out the family’s fancy mat. This heavy plastic
mat, saved for special occasions, was woven with yellow scrolls on a field
of crimson red and was placed ceremoniously on top of the worn everyday
mat on the living-room floor. I was invited to sit down, as usual, to Par-
toho’s right with my back to the wall (so I could face the television). Ito
sat on his left. The two girls were busy in the kitchen making tea, but the
boys all flopped down on the mat in an arc to my right. The two oldest
sons, both past high school age, were sitting closest to me making small
talk, but the younger ones sat around me in a ring, smiling and gaping
as they had a good, long look.

I started to tell them a funny story about changing planes in Jakarta,
but Ito put her hand on my wrist, saying, “Tunggu dulu tesnya...” (“Wait
a second for the tea...”). She frowned toward the kitchen doorway and
told the girls to hurry up. (An unspoken rule dictated that we could only
chatter about truly minor topics—“the boat arrived on time,” “the
weather is nice and clear,” nothing that would evoke a “story” or an
extended narrative— until the tea was placed in front of each person.)
The youngest girl brought in the enameled metal tray heavy with clear,
golden tumblers that softly jittered against each other and placed it in
front of Partoho. We waited quietly as she kneeled and put each person’s
glass in front of him or her, then found a place in the ring of family members on the mat. Partoho hushed the group and made a brief prayer in both Toba Batak and Indonesian thanking God for my safe return, and wishing us good health, prosperity, and success in all of our endeavors. There was a brief pause. Then the conversation burst into full bloom. Did you find a job when you were in America? Did you see that the village road was paved? Tell us what you ate there to become so fat! Are the neighbors still fighting? Tell us again about the first time you came to Samosir!

This circle of domestic conversation, which flourishes in the place where private and public overlap, which embraces both familiares and outsiders, and which shunts between chatter, gossip, and intricate stories, is what best characterizes the nature of my fieldwork among Toba Bataks living on Samosir Island—the way I sat talking and learning with the people of Huta Mungkap village. My experiences sitting in Batak homes engaging in conversation is not so different from the experiences of other researchers, of course. Kathleen Stewart describes how Appalachians use stories to help create the world they experience; this narrated “space at the side of the road” is like a “scenic re-presentation of the force of a lyric image with the power to give pause to the straight line of narrative ordering of events from beginning to end...” (1996:34). The narratives that unfold on the fancy mats of Samosir are not so different, because they too use the artful play of talk to both guide and deter truth’s rigidity.

Many of these rounds of talking took place in the home of my carving teacher, Partoho, and his wife, Ito (plate 1), whose living-room television seemed always to be quietly murmuring to the semiattentive audience of seven children and their school friends who wandered in and out the front door. After a meal, dishes would be picked up, and the rice crumbs on the floor and mat would be swept out the door for the chickens. The topaz-colored glasses would soon appear, filled with the hot sugar water they call tes (TB: tea), and clove smoke would rise up around the single electric light bulb and then farther up, to the open beams of the roof already black with sooty cobwebs and dust. Because they live very close to the stone-cobbled path that connects the lakeshore (dotted with tourist hotels and Batak bathing spots) with the main asphalt road that cuts through the center of Huta Mungkap and circles the island, there is a steady flow of people passing by Partoho and Ito’s house day and night: neighbors going home weighted down with galvanized tubs of damp laundry bal-
anced on their heads; cousins returning from the vegetable market on the
mainland; and a variety of westerners searching for places to stay, laugh-
ing loudly on rented bicycles, or slipping quietly past the house carry-
ing mysterious packages. On occasion, some of these passersby (usually
Bataks) stopped by the house after dinner to talk. While everyone in the
room would politely engage in topics having to do with the weather, the
church, or the local news, it was only when a “story” began to be told that
the unanimous demeanor of the listeners, except for the youngest of chil-
dren, was one of rapt attention.

The narratives told at these times usually concerned recent personal
experiences composed in a familiar, almost formulaic, structure. If the
story was a success (that is, if it was greeted by the listeners with sounds
of amazement or disbelief), it was quite often told all over again, recap-
turing details in greater depth and color. These story tellings, the major
component of the domestic circles of talk, would commonly extend into
the quietest hours of evening, when even the high schoolers had fallen
asleep, the tea had gone cold, and the ashtrays were brimming with cig-
arette butts and clove ashes.

On this particular late afternoon, as it was the day of my return, Ito
wanted to review not only how I had first come to Samosir in 1989 but
also how she and I had originally met twelve months before. She told the
story of how she had “found” me wandering around in the tourist mar-
ketplace in the neighboring town of Siallagan: “I thought you were a
tourist buying carvings, and you looked so rich! Remember? I called
you over and asked you in English where you were staying, right? And,
remember, you started speaking Indonesian and said you were staying at
a losmen (I: home-stay hotel) in Huta Mungkap.... Think of that! Huta
Mungkap, my very own village, and your losmen right next door to my
house! ‘How lucky we all are,’ I thought, ‘to be so close.’” I told Ito that
I remembered our first meeting too, but added that the details of my
coming to Huta Mungkap were more complicated, that the way it all
happened was much more interesting. They smiled and settled them-
selves down for a meaty narrative:

*When I landed in Medan, I asked a taxi driver, a Batak man, as it
turned out, to take me to the cheapest hotel. He brought me to a
glittering glass and chrome high rise. “Too expensive!” I bleated,
but he told me he knew the manager, who would give me a discount.*
The sparkling panes of mirrored glass on the building turned out to be a facade covering up a crumbling colonial ruin from the 1930s whose thick concrete walls enclosed dark, shadowy cubicles. It was being renovated from the front to the rear, and the rooms at the back were indeed very cheap, but also unventilated and swarming with mosquitoes. The most affordable restaurant in the area was across the street at another dilapidated hotel whose own modern facade, I guessed, was planned but not yet built. I ate at this place each day that I was forced to be in Medan obtaining my letters of permission to do research in the province of North Sumatra. Because of this, I got to know the waiters and cooks fairly well. It was here that I first began to hear about Pak Wil.¹

Pak Wil, they told me, is an old Dutchman who had come to retire in Sumatra. “He is very old and gray, but strong enough to lift a man off the ground and throw him!” they said. “Pak Wil was the soldier who captured our first president, Sukarno, when he was considered to be an outlaw by the returning Dutch colonial government — he found Sukarno hiding in the hills above Lake Toba and took him and his entourage to jail,” I was told, “and he can speak Indonesian fluently.” When they found out I was going to Lake Toba in the mountains west of Medan to do research on the Toba Batak culture, they said, “Pak Wil is already there.” I was both curious and annoyed about this “Pak Wil” who seemed to be one step ahead of me, but I gave him little thought, knowing that the lake was so huge that we would never meet.

I got all of my government permits finished in less than a week and left the sweltering miasma that suffocates Medan. Seated in a crowded van that passed through, first, palm oil plantations, then coffee and chocolate plantations, and finally rubber tree plantations, it was several hours before I felt any drop in the temperature. By the time I got to Parapat, the main resort on the edge of the lake, the mountain air had been blowing in through a crack in the window for an hour, so I felt washed free of the hot breath of the lowlands. The bus driver left me and my awkward backpack and bags at an inexpensive losmen on one of the main roads in the town. It was already late in the afternoon, so many of the rooms were taken. There was only one still empty, near the shared bathroom, which the house-
maid told me had been vacated only a day before by Pak Wil. “Is he still around?” I asked. “Will I meet him?” I was told that he had left to go live on Samosir, the huge mountainous island in the center of the lake. The vague twinge of annoyance returned when I heard this: I was planning to move to Samosir myself as soon as I received my local permits.

I had selected Samosir rather than Parapat as my field site because I had come to investigate how Western tourism was changing the way Toba Batak wood carvings are made, and the small towns on the east coast of the island are where westerners tended to go. Nevertheless, I decided to make the best of my forced stay on the mainland by seeing what kind of objects the souvenir shops lining the streets had for sale. Most of the stores (which seemed to exude out of the bottom floors of the town’s buildings, spreading their wares onto the sidewalk, up the facade, and out onto bamboo poles that wavered above the street) sold the same sorts of things: postcards, leather bags, beaded pouches, palm-frond hats, T-shirts, and ornate black carvings. When I asked the shop owners where they got their carvings, some tried to convince me that they made them all themselves; others admitted that all Toba Batak carvings come from Samosir. They stopped short of telling me the exact locations of the towns that made the tall figural staffs and the embellished water buffalo horns in case I was a wealthy trader trying to cut them out of a potential deal.

I traveled back and forth across the giant mountain lake several times, trying to figure out where I should live: would it be Tuktuk, the place where all the tourist accommodations were, or in one of the two larger towns, Tomok and Ambarita, where the tourist “sights” are? On my fourth day of wandering around the center of tourism, I met a very bright and outgoing young Batak woman wearing red lipstick and red shoes who sat near me in order to practice her English. I told her what my project was: that I was looking for a village where wood carvers lived, someplace that was close to the tourist center but not swallowed up by it. She thought about it for a minute but finally said she could offer no suggestions as she was not from the area. She then added this: “If you want to stay at a place that is clean and quiet, just follow along with me to the losmen where my
friend Pak Wil is staying. I think you might like it.” The attraction of coincidence was too great for me to resist, so I joined her on her journey to Huta Mungkap.

Pak Wil eyed me suspiciously the first few times I met him. He was much as he had been described to me: a tall, powerfully built man with white hair, easily angered, and slightly taciturn. He looked at me with piercing blue eyes when we ate breakfast at the same table the first time and, speaking Indonesian with a voice like a shiv, demanded to know why I was asking him so many questions. I stammered a little, and this seemed to make him more angry. He said (in English now): “You came to talk with tourists? Then go talk to them, not me! I’m no tourist.” I was a little surprised at his outburst but just met his glower with a stare, waiting a few seconds before saying, “So you’re a Batak then?” His face froze in its glower, then melted into a pool of charm as he shouted, “ha ha ha a a!” while clapping his hands with crazy glee at my insolence. He switched to Indonesian again, saying “We will drink kamput (I: a kind of distilled liquor) tonight and have a long chat!” He got up from the table to leave smiling and pointed at me, squinting with one eye as if I were a naughty child.

I met him in the evening at the same table: he had already started in on the rot-gut liquor and beckoned me to join him. “The Bataks,” he started (in English, to avoid insulting the hotel workers as much as if he had used Indonesian), “are stupid, ignorant people. I was here in Lake Toba after the war, fighting to keep our colony. You heard that I helped capture Sukarno? It’s true! I have pictures to prove it. Well, I lived here at the lake for over a year and came to love the place and vowed I would come back to stay. During that year, I discovered how stupid and bullheaded the Batak people are, how they are so tangled up in their adat (I: customary laws and traditions) that they can’t progress, how they are too dumb to know when to leave their antique culture behind so they can improve their lives; but I also discovered then that I love them. I came back here to help them, but they won’t listen to me! I want to retire here, but how can I live with such backward people who won’t listen to reason? I love the women here, but I want to punch the old-fashioned men and boys. I love this place, the lake, the island, the mountains,
but where can I live? Is there a place here where I can live out my
life without drowning in adat?!" His narrative went on like this for
several hours, the words becoming more and more disjointed as he
spoke them (and as I heard them). We finished off the bottle of
burning resin.

It was only many months later, after Pak Wil (in the manner of
one who has truly succumbed to bittersweet love) had boomeranged
between the lake and the mainland, finally finding a plot of land near
Parapat on which to build his retirement house, that I began to hear
echoes of his confusing diatribe in the words of Western tourists.
Like Pak Wil, many had come to Samosir loaded with preconceived
notions of who the Toba Bataks might be, and what the lake and
island meant to them. While Pak Wil had returned for what he
hoped would be the rest of his life, these other westerners came for
only temporary glimpses of something beautiful, interesting, or dif-
ferent. For them, confused interactions with the local people would
be only momentary, and only in the controlled atmosphere of tourist
hotels, restaurants, and shops. I wondered how many of the western-
ers with whom I spoke would return to the area someday— which of
them, like Pak Wil, would be pulled back by some ineffable desire
to reconnect with Toba Bataks in order to— to what? To begin
understanding where their incomprehension had begun?

I stopped my story here because it was late and I was weary; I had run out
of words. The two eldest boys walked me back to the hotel, where I sat
on the porch looking out over the lake, thinking. I thought about Pak
Wil returning to Lake Toba. Was I just like him? Why had I returned?

Well, for one reason, I returned to Huta Mungkap because I still had
a lot of research to do. As it turned out, my decision to disembark from
the ship in order to meet Pak Wil had landed me in an ideal fieldwork
site. Huta Mungkap is a village of about 150 people, halfway between
Tuktuk (where all the tourist hotels are) and Siallagan (the village near
Ambarita where one of the tourist “sights” is located). For the first few
weeks I stayed in the hotel, I considered Huta Mungkap merely as a con-
venient place from which to search for my ideal: a carving village that was
slightly isolated from the crush of tourism. It was only when I met Ito in
the marketplace in Siallagan, and was later invited back to her house to
meet Partoho and his brother-in-law Nalom, that I realized how serendip-
itous my move had been: Huta Mungkap is one of only a handful of towns in the area where so many full-time carvers live, and is unusual among that handful for being able to claim three master carvers in addition to eight part-time carvers.

Huta Mungkap didn't look the way I expected a Toba Batak village would: it had only two or three of the huge wooden adat houses whose tall peaked roofs and stilt foundations are pictured in postcards and guidebooks (plate 2). In fact, Huta Mungkap didn't look much like any kind of a village at all, Toba Batak or otherwise. Most of the houses were nestled down by the lake, away from the main paved road, and there was no "center" (figure 1). Except for a few carvers' shops, a couple of houses, two small kedai (I: small roadside shops), and three restaurants that tried to attract Western tourists, all that could be seen of the town from the road were plowed fields.

The village had not always been so dispersed. In the old days, before the Japanese forced them to build the road in the 1940s, and before the first tourists had come to the island in the 1960s, Huta Mungkap had been up on the hill that overlooks the present town. Along with three other smaller villages, Huta Mungkap had thrived on the hill for thirteen generations, protected by thick stone walls topped with a kind of bamboo.
that grows dense and thorny. After Indonesia gained its independence in 1945, the Toba Bataks living in these villages no longer felt threatened by colonizers and invaders, and so moved down to the shore to be closer to the lake waters. The move from hill to shore did not happen all at once: Partoho grew up on the hill in the early 1960s, and the last house was finally dismantled and reconstructed near the lake fifteen years later.

I rented the only empty house in the village, a rambling concrete villa whose ocher-colored walls had been slowly decaying for years. I was slightly outside the cozy confines of Huta Mungkap proper, which isolated me from some village events but gave me a great deal of privacy. This house was a palace by local standards, and was surrounded by a voluptuous garden of glossy rhubarb-colored philodendrons and goliath begonias whose pale lavender flowers lasted only a day. Not far behind the house was a forested hill where one of the old villages had been located. Here were towering hardwood trees, bushy thickets, and grass clumps, all pulsing with brown moths as large as my hand, and orange dragonflies. In the early morning, as I drank my coffee on the back porch, I would see small, quiet birds, sleek with dew, as they crept in the hedges picking among the gray berries hanging there, and in the mid-afternoon, when the whistles and shrill squeals of the bugs were at their most piercing, golden finches would dart zigzags between the branches of the giant trees. Woven through and around all this color and noise was the syncopation of the tiny woodpeckers called apok, whose regular, monotone notes calling back and forth to each other provided the village with an everyday tempo that was always slightly off the beat.

My house was a haven of solitude, for people in the village rarely came to visit even when I invited them. They gave all sorts of polite reasons for this, some people saying that, because I had no wife to make tea, they did not want to trouble me, and others implying that an evening walk, such as a visit to my house would entail, across the dry fields, under the giant trees, and past the cracked boulders (all places where spirits might hover), was too great a risk for a local person to take. The long evenings alone in my house, from which I could see the twinkling lights of the village homes, were difficult to endure.

It was because of this that I began visiting the homes of people such as Partoho and Ito, risking the danger of passing the spirits in hollow tree trunks to have some company. I happily sat on their plastic mats in their ruang tamu (I: guest rooms) listening to village rumors, scandals, and his-
stories above the television chatter. Here, in these in-between places that are not really part of the intimacy of the “inside” family rooms and not completely part of the formal and structured “outside” of the public spaces, jokes are made, recipes are shared, rules of etiquette, and thoughts about aesthetics are discussed; it is also where long-winded narratives like this one are told.

This book is about tourists and artisans, wood carvings and marketplaces. It is about how the tourists and artisans interact, about how the carvings are made, how they are sold, and how they are collected. It poses questions that are at once simplistic and philosophical: Who is who? What is what? Where is there? In many ways, the book is about inaccurate assumptions and mistaken identities, and about the subsequent confusions and revelations that unfold when the errors are revealed. But it is also about how places that attract tourism allow individuals (both tourists and nontourists) to behave atypically.

As an ethnography about the Toba Bataks, this book tells about the lives of certain individuals, at a particular time and through a particular perspective. Using a series of stories about my experiences with woodcarvers and tourists, I will try to evoke for the reader what life is like in a small North Sumatran village that is the focus of tourist attention. In doing so, I hope to evoke the flavor of the narratives I heard so often while sitting on the woven mats of my Toba Batak friends, where occurrences were retold, not to establish some aspect of factual reality, but to re-create an experience in order to let the mundane become momentarily plump with significance, and to reveal connections and relevancies that in any other context might seem extravagant or farfetched. Unlike the Balinese sitting rooms described by Unni Wikan (1990:41), in which a visitor might feel uncomfortable and suspicious, Toba Batak sitting rooms are places where visitors can speak their minds, and where conversations and ideas flow freely. I tell these stories in an effort to illuminate some of the ordinary aspects of living on Samosir Island, occasionally allowing myself the luxury of pausing over vignettes or details that might seem extraneous. Here, basking in what I saw as Samosir’s character, the seemingly insignificant moments are allowed to sing their implications to the fullest.

The shape of some of these stories is intended to mimic the narrative form I came to understand as being most typically Toba Batak: that is,
beginning with several sentences that state the context of the story (and
the speaker’s intentions in telling it), which are repeated a second time
using parallel words or synonyms; progressing to a presentation of the
story itself, including all pertinent and unusual details, and stressing peak
events two (sometimes three) times using phrases of equal or similar
meaning; continuing on until the crux of the tale is uttered abruptly; and
ending with a brief reiteration of the introduction followed by several sen-
tences noting in different ways that the narration is an accurate portrayal
referring to here are not the formal retellings of previously told tales (such
as Mary Steedly describes among the Karo Batak [1993:203]), but are
rather narratives that individuals tell of recently lived experiences.

My intention is to provide a collection of narrative accounts written
in a way that cleaves as closely as possible to an oral style. Although I am
writing the stories in English, I try to maintain a sense of the cadence
and lilt of Batak-inflected Indonesian. I do this not only to emphasize the
character and importance of Toba Batak story-telling traditions but also
to allow myself the creative freedom I find necessary to portray my expe-
riences among the Toba Bataks meaningfully. Many of the stories here
contain statements or dialogues presented in quotation marks. These
quoted sections rarely represent mechanically recorded utterances (the
story in Chapter 6 being the primary exception), for I found in my
research that the appearance of a tape recorder stifled more talk than it
inspired: the machine itself became the object of conversation, the small
flickering lights and soft purring of the mechanism constantly making
people forget what they were just about to say. In this work, quotation
marks indicate stories and conversations as they were reconstructed and
written down in my field notes shortly after they were uttered. All con-
versations with local people were carried out in the Indonesian language
rather than in Toba Batak, a language in which I lacked fluency (see
Chapter 3); all conversations with westerners were carried out in English.

As with many Batak stories, mine play fast and loose with some of the
“facts.” Here, time is compressed, characters renamed, and venues shifted
slightly as needed, not only in an effort to make the stories more com-
pelling, but also to evoke the ambience of Huta Mungkap most vividly.
All personal names have been changed, as has the name of the village
where the research was done, in order to preserve the privacy of those with
whom I spoke; no other place-names are pseudonyms. I try to highlight
the humorous aspects of events in these stories in order to mirror the Toba Bataks’ own propensity toward wordplay and comedy in everyday conversation—a characteristic which neither the Bataks nor the anthropologists that work with them have yet fully addressed.  

During the fifteen months of my fieldwork on Samosir (1994–1995), I talked with westerners from a variety of nations about their reasons for coming to the area, and their reasons for purchasing carved wood souvenirs. I also spoke at length with Toba Batak vendors in the souvenir marketplace about their experiences with Western tourists, and how they managed to sell their carvings successfully, often despite their lack of proficiency in English. Finally, I talked extensively with Toba Batak wood-carvers, one of whom (Partoho) took me on as his apprentice.

By means of these conversations and the apprenticeship, I began to understand how Toba Batak wood-carvers and vendors perceive Samosir both as a home and as a tourist site, how they create ways to understand themselves and Western tourists, and how they try both to preserve and to rejuvenate their wood-carving traditions. I also began to understand how Western tourists imagine the terrain through which they are moving, how they compose notions of self- (and other) identities, and the means by which they judge and select carved wood souvenirs.

The challenge I face here is how to illustrate the Toba Bataks and the Western tourists, their touristic encounters and the effects of those encounters, and my relationship to it all, without relying on one single totalizing framework—of dominant and resistant, of us and them, or of them and other—the use of which might clarify certain relationships, but only at the cost of masking others. My effort has been to describe touristic situations on Samosir Island in such a way that the individual participants and their diverse cultural contexts are fairly and clearly represented.

If there is any continuous thread that connects the stories in this work, it might be a curiosity about such things as how people identify difference or how they distinguish categories. That is, throughout this work the reader will be provoked to think about the way in which certain categories are discerned and particular types are differentiated, the way in which variations are bounded and congruities marked. The focus here is how two specific groups, Western tourists and Toba Bataks, construct and define boundaries (for people, places, and objects), and then act on those constructions and definitions. To make the situation more clear, a few
words must to be said here to illuminate some of the limits of my fieldwork experiences and to clarify how this book is written.

**Talking with the Toba Batak**

Many Toba Batak did not know how to interact with me because they did not know where to place me socially; they wanted to identify the name of a position with which to connect me, but found it difficult to say exactly who I was. I was excluded altogether from the most basic Toba Batak social system because I had no clan name. Furthermore, I had only an ambiguous connection to another of the important classifiers, occupation. Where did I belong in their social system? It is possible that my background as a one-time professional cartoonist and illustrator helped me in forming some relationships with Toba Batak individuals: I think Partoho would have been less willing to teach me carving if he had not seen my artistic abilities; my standing with certain adolescent boys seems to have improved when they saw I could draw caricatures. Even though I drew pictures to entertain my local friends in the kedai on various occasions, people did not think of me as seniman (I: “artist”).

It was obvious that I was an outsider, a westerner, and a male, and these characteristics excluded me from certain interactions and conversations (such as with unmarried females). But there were other issues as well. The Toba Batak do not consider it peculiar for a Western male in his late twenties or early thirties to be unmarried, but when one reaches the late thirties there must be some explanation for this state of affairs. I showed no interest in chasing after the local or Western tourist females, and furthermore showed no interest in talking about such pursuits, so some Bataks toyed with the idea (which they discussed very diplomatically and, so they thought, out of my earshot) that I might be a weird form of banchi (I: transvestite, or hermaphrodite).

Others saw a certain purity of intent in my actions and coupled this with my extended education to propose that I was some sort of pendeta (I: pastor or priest). When I offered to teach English at the local high school without pay, many saw me fitting into the social category of instructor. Despite the fact that my employment at the high school lasted only three or four months, my social standing as “teacher” remained for the duration of my fieldwork. Because of this, many of the Bataks I knew on a daily