

The Myth of Batak Cannibalism?

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch

Victoria Glendinning's new biography of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles (*Raffles and the Golden Opportunity*, London: Profile Books, 2012), mentions Raffles breaking off a sea voyage in 1819 at Tapanuli Bay off the west coast of Sumatra, in a prominent Batak area, and records his fascination with their being "flesh eaters".

Students of Batak culture inevitably arrive at the day when they find themselves reading bloodcurdling stories of Batak cannibalism. Most Asian Civilisations Museum docents skip any reference to the custom and dwell on the architecture (long, multi-family dwellings with twin-peaked roofs constructed entirely without nails and windows and entered via a trapdoor through the floor rather than an ordinary door), or on the decorative motifs of reptiles and birds.

If there are no children amongst visitors, I like to tell the story of the power behind the *datu's* (or magician-priest's) staff of authority, known as a *tunggal panaluan*. This elaborately carved staff depicts the story of an incestuous young couple who bring the wrath of the gods upon both themselves and everyone who tries to help them, including *datu's*. The staff obtains its power from the obedience of the 'essence' of the child slave embodied within it. This kidnapped child once served as a slave to the *datu*, carrying out his orders and commands before being ritually killed. Its corpse is then brewed into a potion inserted into the staff, supplying the magical powers that continue to fulfill the *datu's* will.

Headhunters yes, but cannibals? Tales of the "cannibalistic kingdom in the interior of Sumatra" first reached European ears through early travellers' tales. William Marsden (1754-1836), a renowned English orientalist, was one of the first Europeans to thrill readers with such tales. But before turning the page in search of gory details, this is when we need to stop to recall Southeast Asian history and

ask what was happening in this region in the 1700s.

Southeast Asia had most likely been trading with Arab traders since the ninth century, if not earlier. Sumatra was a popular island as it was one of the first land masses reached once traders crossed the Bay of Bengal and supplied not only fresh water and food, but also minerals and timber (including camphor). When the Europeans came on the scene in the early 1500s seeking their spice islands, they stopped at many of the same trading ports and sites. By 1700, the British had established trading posts at a number of sites on Sumatra. It didn't take long for local rulers and chieftains across Southeast Asia to discover that one of the quickest roads to riches was to supply these foreign traders with what they desired – their lands' indigenous goods. To maintain control, it was imperative that the coastal chieftains keep traders from venturing inland to source goods first-hand.

In 2005, Japanese professor Masahi Hirosue published an article concluding that the "same culture that had developed a system of writing [the Batak script] understood and wielded the power of propaganda." His conclusion, after studying hundreds of reports across the centuries, was that it was the Sumatran coastal rulers and local chiefs who invented the stories of cannibalism among the inland peoples to keep the traders at bay. Their scare tactics were so successful that when visiting Sumatra even Marco Polo was so scared of the 'cannibals' that he stayed in coastal ports and never travelled inland. The English, including Raffles, were similarly duped.

Nor was the fraud one-way. Professor Hirosue records that the chieftains also warned their inland compatriots that the European traders were "dangerous, diseased, and slave traders", and then offered themselves as mediators between the local 'cannibals' and Europeans.

If you're looking for a good Batak tale to share with visitors, tell the Batak creation story of their first king and ancestor, Si Raja Batak (King of the Bataks), who resided on the Central Mountain west of Lake Toba, but seeing the beauty of the area, descended from heaven to earth on a bamboo pole.

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Photos courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum

