



Cannibalism

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Cannibalism, the eating of one's own kind, is a practice that occurs in both humans and non-humans. Some people consumed their own kin to ensure that their spirits joined those of their ancestors; others ate their enemies in anger in the context of warfare, in some cases to acquire the powers of those they had defeated; and others ate sorcerers who they thought brought them disease and death. Archaeologists provided evidence of prehistoric cannibalism among different peoples as well as among many of our ancestors. In the twentieth century, anthropologists published well-documented accounts of cannibalism in Papua New Guinea, South America, and Africa. Resisting the image of primitive people as cannibals, anthropologists often wrote about cannibalism as a metaphor, in the form of human alligators, zombies, and witches. In the 1970s cannibalism was at the centre of three widely-publicised debates. The first two featured a small number of distinguished scholars who held different views about who had the right to speak about and to evaluate conflicting claims about other people's pasts. The third was provoked by one anthropologist's argument that, except in the case of cannibalism in the context of survival, the cannibals described by anthropologists were mythical creatures. This gave rise to a passionate response by anthropologists who viewed the critique as an attack on their discipline in general, and on their research methods. Contemporary descriptions of cannibalism, seeming to echo the archaeological accounts, now argue that in one form or another, we are all cannibals.

Introduction

The term 'cannibal', defined as eating one's own kind, is a legacy of Columbus' encounter in 1492 with the Caribs of the Antilles, said to have been consumers of human flesh. Studies documenting the practice of cannibalism among non-humans, identified in more than 1,500 species (Polis 1981: 225), have led to the distinction between human and non-human cannibalism. The term *anthropophagy*, from the Greek *anthropophagia* ('the eating of men'), is retained to refer to the eating of humans by other humans. Cannibalism is used to describe both the human and non-human practice.

Cannibalism represents the ultimate forbidden behaviour for many Western societies, something to relegate to other cultures, other times, and other places. New archaeological research has provided evidence that long before the invention of metals, before Egypt's pyramids were built, before the origins of agriculture, and before the explosion of Paleolithic cave art, cannibalism could already be found among many different people, as well as among many of our ancestors (White 2001: 88).

As this entry illustrates, the cannibal was also an object of fascination in the ancient literature recorded by historians, theologians, and philosophers, and then in the accounts of explorers, merchants, and ambassadors during Europe's Age of Exploration. Distant people were often portrayed as cannibals: that is,

as strange, animal-like creatures. In the twentieth century, anthropologists depicted cannibalism as another example of the many ways of being human, answering the question of what the practice meant for those who consumed the dead. Some people ate the bodies of enemies killed during warfare, and some killed and ate sorcerers who they believed had brought them death and misfortune. Others consumed the bodies of deceased relatives in mortuary ceremonies, expressing love and grief for those they had lost, a sentiment that unites us as human beings. The diversity of cannibalism as practice, and of the contexts in which it occurred, is evident in the three regions in the world where the practice has received the most attention, namely Papua New Guinea, South America, and Africa. In the 1970s, cannibalism was at the centre of three anthropological debates, which raised methodological issues about how we know 'others'. A new approach to cannibalism (Nyamnjoh 2018) extended the meaning of the term from ingesting others to considering others as food for the body, the mind, and the soul. This broader notion of cannibalism conveys a more ethically sensitive understanding of the nature of human relationships. The entry ends with a reflection on the future of the cannibal in anthropology.

Historical reports of cannibalism

Early reports of cannibals can be traced back to ancient Greek and Roman times, where they were often part of stories about mythical creatures in unexplored reaches of the world. They include fabulous and bizarre [tribes](#) of men, such as the man-eating Cynocephali, dog-headed people held to be living in Asia in the fifth and sixth centuries BC. Homer, the presumed author of the epic poem *The Odyssey*, composed between 800 and 750 BC, depicts a tribe of giant cannibals living on an island native to the Laestrygonians, who pelt Odysseus's ships with boulders, sinking all ships but his own. In *Histories*, a book published between 426 and 415 BC, Herodotus wrote about cannibal nations that inhabited the margins of the world. Pliny the Elder's *Natural history*, drew on Herodotus' broad mix of myths, legends, and facts to recount rumours of strange peoples on the edges of the world. This inspired medieval bestiaries and the illustrations of old maps (Sandys 1911). The European catalogues of other peoples and marvellous creatures, *Liber monstrorum* and *Tractatus monstrorum*, thought to have been written in the eighth century, stressed the threatening nature of their material. One list of creatures that provoked the greatest terror included harpies, crocodiles, boa constrictors, enormous ants, and cannibals. From the 1240s through the late fourteenth century, Europeans set out for Asia in increasing numbers as missionaries, ambassadors, explorers, and entrepreneurs, recording their experiences for a growing audience at home. The Venetian merchant Marco Polo, who made two extended Asian voyages in the second half of the thirteenth century, described cannibals as cruel beings who liked to eat strangers raw and highly spiced (Daston & Park 1998: 24-6).

The discovery by Columbus of cannibals in the Americas did not just lead European observers to recycle ancient theories around cannibalism. It also raised questions on the appropriate nature of funerary rights

and the Christian doctrine of the resurrection, for example. When one man ate another, in what body would the eaten person be resurrected? Would the owner's flesh be restored to him, or would it remain part of the cannibal? These questions also arose in the case of shipwrecks when fish ate the body of a drowned man and the fish were then eaten by other humans. The rise of modern [science](#) and discourses, notably those of physics and chemistry as the scientific study of substance and particles, led to the disappearance of many of the theories and styles of philosophical language that cannibalism inspired. As a result, a world of arguments, [values](#), and sensibilities has been lost (Avramescu 2009).

The literal ingestion of human flesh, not surprisingly, had also evoked the Eucharist, its sublimated variant, and the ritual commemoration of the Last Supper. Debate over the Eucharist, fraught with cannibal associations since the earliest days of the Christian Church, became a major point of polemic contest in Reformation Europe (Rawson 1997: 4). Following his encounter in Rouen with the Tupinamba people of South America, who said that they ate the bodies of their dead as a matter of honour, Michel de Montaigne denounced the cruelty displayed by Christians during the religious wars in France:

I think there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead; more barbarity in lacerating by rack and torture a body still fully able to feel things, in roasting him little by little and having him bruised and bitten by pigs and dogs (as we have not only read about but seen in recent memory, not among enemies in antiquity but among our fellow-citizens and neighbours - and, what is worse, in the name of duty and religion) than in roasting him and eating him after death (1991: 235-6).

Montaigne's essay *On cannibals*, first published in 1580, is viewed now as an early statement of cultural relativism, which calls attention to the importance of local context in understanding the meaning of particular beliefs and activities, without thereby asserting that all value systems are equally valid.

Papua New Guinea

Francis Edgar Williams, a government anthropologist in Papua from 1922 to 1943, was among the first to publish [ethnographic](#) material about cannibalism in New Guinea (Williams 1930), a Trust Territory at the time administered by Australia. Williams suggested that his accounts of the practice provided a long and perhaps ill-assorted menu from which the anthropological diner was invited to take what tempted him (1936: x). He reported that the Orokaiva had once been a high-spirited and warlike people, who frequently raided, killed, and ate one another. Their reason for cannibalism was said to be the simple desire for good food (Williams 1930: 170-1). War-parties by the Keraki included raiding their neighbours, clubbing, and beheading them. Back home, a period of rejoicing and [feasting](#) followed, which Williams describes as 'not cannibalism', except for morsels, such as eyeballs or snippets from the cheek. After this, they resumed ordinary life until they were raided in turn and lost some of their own heads. A brief outbreak of head-

hunting in the Moorhead district in 1928 was judged to be the last (Williams 1936: 26).

In the early 1930s, nearly one million previously-unknown people were discovered living in the New Guinea Highlands. Following a hiatus during WWII, as the number of anthropologists increased, New Guinea provided an opportunity to undertake research in the unexplored regions of the world. Well-documented cases of cannibalism were described for a number of populations in the Eastern Highlands. Charles Julius, another government anthropologist, sent his survey of the beliefs and practices of the South Fore peoples, living in today's Eastern Highlands Province to the Department of Public Health, and observed that in most areas women and uninitiated men had both the right and duty to eat dead relatives (Julius 1981 [1957]). Based on data collected in 1951 and 1952, Ronald Berndt's ethnography *Excess and constraint: social control among a New Guinea mountain people* (1962) provided information about the intra- and inter-district manifestations of cannibalism. It showed that the North Fore ate their own dead (endocannibalism) as well as the bodies of enemies killed in warfare (exocannibalism). Berndt offered his work as a contribution to the sociology of conflict, but he also said that 'Dead human flesh, to these people, is food, or potential food', and 'the diet of the region is apparently deficient in protein' (1962: 270-1). In 1961, Robert and Shirley Glasse (later Lindenbaum) arrived in the South Fore region with a charge to provide cultural information which might support the hypothesis that genetics could explain the epidemic of kuru, the neurological disease afflicting the Fore people (Bennet *et al.* 1959). Their data did not support this premise, and they proposed instead that the epidemic was related to the consumption of deceased relatives by women and children of both sexes. Robert published an account of the hypothesis in 1967. In 1976, Carleton Gajdusek was awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine for confirming that kuru was infectious. Gajdusek did not doubt that the Fore were cannibals, but he initially dismissed the hypothesis that cannibalism was the mode of transmission. Instead, he proposed a variety of non-oral routes of transmission (Sorenson & Gajdusek 1969; Gajdusek 1970; Gajdusek 1971).

A new chapter in the [history](#) of kuru and cannibalism began in 1996 when an interdisciplinary team of investigators composed of neurologists and an anthropologist, later known as the MRC Prion Unit, began to study the disease. Their studies were informed by Gajdusek's research, and by Stanley Pruziner's discovery of prions, the infectious agent responsible for fatal neurodegenerative disorders in humans and [animals](#), for which he had received the Nobel Prize in 1997. Jerome Whitfield, the anthropologist who was located in the South Fore, working with a group of Fore research assistants sent bloods collected from women as well as cultural information about mortuary practices to the rest of the group (Whitfield *et al.* 2008; Whitfield 2015). The MRC Prion Unit published three important findings. In the first, elderly women known to have consumed deceased kin, but who had not developed kuru, were shown to have a distinct type of prion protein gene, protecting them from the disease (Mead *et al.* 2003). A second study, using a larger sample, identified the epicentre of the epidemic in the South Fore Purosa Valley (Mead *et al.* 2009), and a third showed that a naturally occurring variant of the human prion gene completely prevents prion disease

(Asante *et al.* 2015). Asante noted that the collapse of the Fore population had been prevented by the cessation of cannibalism in the late 1950s, which had interrupted the route of transmission and led to a gradual decline in incidence. However, if transmission had continued at the epicentre of the affected region, the area might have been repopulated with kuru-resistant individuals.^u

Some studies in the region explored the links between cannibalism and peoples' beliefs and cosmologies. Drawing on Freud, Gillian Gillison's ethnography *Between culture and fantasy* (1993) revealed the complex ideas held by the Gimi of Papua New Guinea about sexuality and conception and the rights of cannibalism performed in Oedipal dramas. The Gimi, like their neighbours, the South Fore, only practiced endocannibalism, as part of mourning rituals governed by convention and filled with emotion. A more recent ethnography of the Ankave people living in Papua New Guinea's Southern Gulf Province described invisible cannibal creatures called *ombo'*, held responsible for bringing fatal illness to humans with the goal of feasting on human flesh of Ankave corpses (Lemonnier 2005). The *ombo'* represent the transformed spirit of a long-deceased person that members of the Ankave hold within themselves and that they can direct towards a victim. Pierre Lemonnier suggests that comparing the *ombo'* with the image of cannibal characters by other groups reveals the ways in which the human [mind](#) imagines death, evil, and misfortune.

A number of anthropologists wrote about cannibalism in the context of warfare. In his ethnography *The making of great men*, Maurice Godelier (1986) described Baruya great leaders meeting in single combat. When one felled an enemy, he carried the body back home where he severed the right 'fighting' hand and daubed his body with the victim's blood. He sometimes cut off the arms and legs, which he cooked and ate to appropriate the powers of the vanquished enemy. Elsewhere on the island of New Guinea, Gerard Zegwaard (1959) described cannibalism in the context of warfare among the Asmat of Netherlands New Guinea. K.F. Koch (1970) said it was a component of cannibalistic revenge among the Jale in the province of Irian Jaya. And among the Baktaman, a group of 183 people occupying a tract of mountain rain forest in West Sepik Province, cannibalism was said to be an escalation of warfare, done in anger and a lust for revenge (Barth 1975).

Cannibalism could also be a form of punishment for people considered to be malefactors. From the early 1960s to the early 1970s, a number of linguistically and culturally related peoples in the Strickland-Bosavi region in inland South Papua gained a degree of notoriety for their reputed anthropophagic practices. Almost all deaths among the Kaluli (Schieffelin 1976), the Etoro (Kelly 1993), the Samo (Shaw 1990), the Gebusi (Knauff 1985), and the Onabasulu (Ernst 1999), were attributed to witches and sometimes sorcerers, who were executed and often consumed (Ernst 1999: 144-7).

The Korowai people of southern West Papua were said to be preoccupied by the threat to their lives posed by a category of 'witches', pathologically deviant men who lived amidst the human population and caused

death by eating people's bodies. Outraged mourners could seize the accused men and transfer them to people living several miles away, who shot, butchered, and consumed the witches. At some future time, the consumers might send a witch in return, a balancing of negative transactions that ameliorated the outrage felt in the initial exchange. An execution also often led to the transfer of a woman to the witch's relatives in anticipation of her bearing children as a form of regenerative long-distance social interaction. Cannibalistic belief thereby contributed to the Korowai's previously high homicide rates (Stasch 2001).

Among the Daribi who occupy the volcanic plateaus south of Simbu province, only adults and aged persons were eaten and were permitted to eat the dead. Members of nuclear families did not normally eat one another. Daribi clan membership was based on [sharing](#) wealth, symbolised by sharing or giving meat. Consuming the flesh of clan members was seen as akin to sharing 'vital wealth'. Members of a clan were held to 'eat meat together', while those of other clans 'give meat' or 'are given meat'. Meat also served as currency, in that a man could marry the sister or daughter of someone with whom he shares meat, for example. In this and many other instances, the study of cannibalistic beliefs and practices shows that Indigenous social structures included symbolic systems that are usually relegated to the areas of religion or myth (Wagner 1967).

Cannibalism disappeared rapidly in Papua New Guinea in the 1960s following contact with missionaries and colonial officers who tended to abhor the practice. However, many of the cosmological perspectives in terms of which cannibalism made sense locally have persisted in mortuary rituals, which are now the largest and most expensive ceremonial events in the Pacific.

South America

Hans Staden's *The true history of his captivity* (2008 [1557]) is considered to be a foundational text in the history of the European discovery of Brazil, and a work of [ethnographic](#) significance. While serving as a gunner in a Portuguese fort on the Brazilian coast in 1550, Staden was captured by Tupi Indians. He took notes on their skill in shooting wild [animals](#) and catching fish, the nature of their government by chiefs, and many other aspects of daily life. He also witnessed cannibalism, and recorded occasions when he feared he was about to be killed and eaten. This was the earliest European account of the ritual execution and consumption of war captives among Tupi people who would become a quintessential case of cannibalism in native South America. In the sixteenth century, Jesuit missionaries sent reports and letters to headquarters about the customs and practices of cannibalism among the Tupian-speaking Indians. Their accounts proved to be valuable, because these coastal groups had disappeared as a result of disease, warfare, enslavement, and assimilation by the time serious anthropological research began (Forsyth 1983). The relationships of the Tupi with enemy groups were not always negative. When the work of explorer Jean de Lery (1536-1613), was examined closely, it was apparent that warfare also provided the means for establishing reciprocal [relations](#) among warring groups that were essential to the maintenance of culture (Levi-Strauss

1976).

In contrast to endocannibalism in Melanesia, which aimed to preserve, perpetuate, and redistribute elements of the deceased, endocannibalism in South America more often had the objective of eradicating the corpse in order to sever relations between the dead person's body and spirit, and between living people and the spirits of the dead. Endocannibalism, as part of funerary or mortuary ritual, is thought to have been more widely practiced in lowland South America than anywhere else in the world. It usually took place in one of two forms: people consumed the ground, roasted bones or bone ash, the more common practice, or they consumed cooked flesh. Bone-eating was especially concentrated in northern Brazil, the Upper Orinoco regions of southern Venezuela, and western and northern Amazonia (Conklin 2001: xxiv-xxv). A poignant account of bone ash cannibalism among the Amahuaca in southeastern Peru portrayed a mother wailing while she prepared her deceased daughter's body for cremation, grinding the bones into a powder, mixing them with a maize beverage ready to drink, and then throwing the remaining ashes into the river. The ritual had taken almost two weeks (Dole 1974).

Flesh-eating was less common in South America, but it was reported in several areas, including in Paraguay by the French ethnographers Pierre and Helene Clastres, who attended a Guayaki funeral in 1963 at which the participants said they ate almost an entire corpse (Clastres, P. 1974). A case in which the secondary father^m ate a child, thinking that this could cure his illness, was reported by Pierre Clastres and Lucien Sebag (1964). Once the child's meat had been consumed, the bones of the corpse were broken, sucked, and thrown into the fire. The skull was also crushed and burned, the smoke rising from the fire allowing the child's soul to ascend to its heavenly abode.

Some South American [ethnic](#) groups practiced both endo- and exocannibalism. The Wari' of Rondonia in Brazil ate their enemies killed during warfare as well as the corpses of fellow Wari' at funerals (Conklin 2001: xxiii). A southern Amazonian group of the Wari' are also said to have eaten their dead and their enemies until at least the beginning of the 1960s (Vilaca 2000). A curious case blurring both categories of cannibalism took place among the Tupinamba, a Tupi ethnic group who regularly consumed their prisoners of war. According to analyses by Helen Clastres (1972), a number of rites first integrated a prisoner into the community. Fattened up and given to a woman in marriage, he changed his status from enemy to that of an ally. He was then killed by the woman's brother [\[FS1\]](#), a process that is driven by desires for revenge as well as attempts at suppressing social differences.

Much has been written about the Uitoto people who live on the lands between the Putumayo and Caqueta rivers in Southeastern Colombia and Northeastern Peru. Eugene Robuchon, a French explorer, was the first to write about the Uitoto practice of exocannibalism (1907, 2010 [1907]) a practice that fascinated him greatly but that he never got to witness. Konrad Preuss (1984) provided additional recordings,

transcription in the native language, and translations of the cannibalistic *bai* ritual, in which only men ate the flesh of their opponents, to appease the souls of those who were devoured, to protect the souls of the devourers, endowing them with supernatural powers useful in warfare.

The Uitoto had suffered greatly during the Rubber Boom from the late 1890s to the late 1920s, with the arrival of the Peruvian Amazon Company, a British-Peruvian venture devoted entirely to the extraction and sale of wild rubber from the Putumayo area. The opulence of the Rubber Barons was exceeded only by their brutality. They hired their own armies to defend their claims, to acquire new land, and to capture native [labourers](#). The first accusations of rubber violence were compiled in texts by Walter Hardenburg (1913) and G. Sidney Paternoster (1913). First-hand reports on the atrocities can be found also in a book by Carlos Valcarel (1915), and in the report and diary of the British consul, Roger Casement (1912, 1998 [1912]). Based on these reports, the anthropologist Michael Taussig argued that the Rubber Boom violence was due to a 'synergistic relation of savagery and business, cannibalism and capitalism' (Taussig 1984: 482). Fear of Indigenous cannibalism drove the colonists' imagination, and was used to justify the torture, enslavement, and mass murder of Indigenous people. It is said that at least 100,000 Indigenous people had died during the Rubber Boom.

Cannibalism was also a prominent theme for many native South Americans whose images of cannibals appeared in their myths, cosmologies, and eschatologies (the component of theology concerned with death, judgment, and the ultimate destiny of the soul and of humankind). One theme is that death itself is a form of cannibalism. The Yanomami, for example, think of every death as an act of cannibalism in which the human soul is devoured by a spirit or an enemy. The Araweté Tupian speakers of Para, Brazil, believe that at death, human spirits are cannibalised by the gods, then rejuvenated and transformed into gods themselves. The Kulina, Arawakan speakers of Acre in Brazil, hold that when a human spirit journeys to the underworld, it is ritually welcomed and devoured by Kulina ancestors, who have become white-lipped peccaries, a pig-like hoofed mammal (Conklin: xxvi).

Such cannibalistic beliefs and practices from South America have advanced anthropological theory. The publication of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's *From the enemy's point of view* (1992) presented a new way of looking at the relationship between humans and nonhumans. Viveiros de Castro analyses the belief held by the Araweté people that the souls of their dead will be devoured by the gods, an act by which their souls become immortal. To explain this assertion, he presents Araweté society as composed of gods and men, in which human destiny is to remain in a process of constantly becoming other beings. In this society, cannibalism is an important practice that enables them to change from one entity to another. These insights were fundamental to question what it means to be human. According to Viveiros de Castro, intentionality and reflexive consciousness might no longer be attributes of humanity, but potentially available to all beings in the cosmos. Animals, plants, gods, and spirits were also potentially persons, and could occupy a subject position in their dealings with humans (Fausto 2007: 497). The adoption of such

'perspectivism', led to an '[ontological turn](#)' in anthropological theory, suggesting that difference could be understood not in terms of different world views, but different worlds, and that all of these worlds were of equal validity. Viveiros de Castro's publication had also provided a framework for the comparative analysis of predation as a key process and metaphor for socio-cultural analysis and practice (McCallum 1999: 445).

Africa

Early accounts of cannibalism in Africa refer to the Azande, especially the 'Niam-Niam', racist stereotypes of Central African people who were depicted in medieval Arab sources as naked creatures with filed teeth and dog's heads, living at the end of the known world. Stereotypical accounts of cannibals came also from west-central Africa in the sixteenth century (Heinze 2003). With the exception of the German, Ewald Volhard, who in 1939 published a 500-page study on the worldwide practices of cannibalism, classical social anthropologists are said to have been extremely hesitant to take up the subject (Behrend 2011: 8). In his legendary account, *Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande*, the anthropologist Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (1937) mentioned the topic of cannibalism only once, noting that it was interesting to hear well-travelled Azande speak about the pygmies of the forests and of the artificially deformed heads of the Mangbetu, their curious crafts, and the cannibalism of the Abarambo who shouted at them '*nombi! nombi!*': 'flesh! flesh!' (1937: 278).

In a later review of a study of Azande Cannibalism (1955), Evans-Pritchard agreed with the study's author Renzo Carmignani that some of the Azande had practiced cannibalism, but he doubted that it could anywhere have been a regular occurrence. His inquiries on the subject had led him to believe that there was no other reason for eating human flesh than the desire for meat. In 1956 he published 'Cannibalism: a Zande text', an account of the practice written by his Zande clerk, which had a detailed description of dissecting a corpse, the process of cooking and eating it, and the assertion that in the past almost all Azande ate people, including that the author himself had done so. Evans-Pritchard refuted the latter claim a few years later when he concluded that Azande cannibalism had not in fact been widespread, and that if it occurred, it did not bear cultural meaning but was driven by hunger and a taste for meat (Evans-Pritchard 1960).

In the 1970s, information about cannibalism in Africa was sometimes arrived at indirectly while the anthropologist was investigating other topics, such as witchcraft. Peter Geschiere reported that he often heard the term 'In such and such a village we couldn't eat' to be a prohibition against eating together, but the real meaning the interlocutors wished to make was that they could not eat its inhabitants (1997: 33). Restrictions on cannibalism, it seemed, constituted a sort of map of the region, permitting one to distinguish between kin-linked villages (potential allies) and others (Geschiere 1997: 33). The stereotype of the Africans as cannibals had featured in the texts of traders, explorers, and missionaries ever since the sixteenth century. In Cameroon, the Germans were obsessed with cannibalism, so anthropologists tried to

keep their distance. Another complicating factor was that African elites spoke strongly against the stereotype of Africans as cannibals (Gingrich pers. com. 10.1.2021 - 3.2.2021). This might throw light on Evans-Pritchard's cautious approach to the topic.⁴⁴

In varying degrees, discussions of cannibalism are part of grappling with the question of how to represent Africa, and how to translate experience there to the rest of the world (White 2003: 632). The topic of cannibalism was discussed in the literature on modernity and the occult in [postcolonial](#) states experiencing economic distress. Contemporary images of the occult were said to be mediated by colonial memory. In some parts of Africa, experiences of [colonialism](#) were themselves configured by traumatic memories of earlier trans-regional processes of the slave trade. The postcolonial condition might be the most recent historical predicament in which commodification and rupture were experienced and made sense of through images of occult beings, such as cannibals (Shaw 2001). Cannibalism, presented in accounts of propaganda describing 'man eaters' in west-central Africa in the second half of the nineteenth century, was shown to be a colonial-imperialist stereotype, said to coexist with an internal African version (Heinze 2003). An anthropological account of cannibalism among the Sherbro of Sierra Leone combined historical and [ethnographic](#) material, with an analysis of the symbolic and political implications of cannibalistic belief (MacCormack 1983). Here, allegation of cannibalism was a strong political weapon used to menace people, and a technique for controlling a rival political faction. It was also used against chiefs, government officials, and allegedly even a prime minister, said to have been brought down by the accusation. It was a way of saying, 'This person is a willful, selfish seeker after antisocial personal power and not fit to rule' (MacCormack 1983: 59-60).

Different African and European images of the cannibals may often intersect and influence each other. Cannibalism, food, eating, and being eaten in its many variations were explored in *Resurrecting cannibals*, a book about Tooro, a small kingdom in Western Uganda (Behrend 2011). Behrend wrote about people who felt threatened by cannibals, churches who combatted cannibals, and anthropologists who found themselves suspected of being cannibals. The book shows how the figure of the resurrecting cannibal drew on both pre-Christian ideas and church dogma of the bodily resurrection and the ritual of Holy Communion.

In the 1990s, Western journalists wrote about cannibalism in the context of warfare, focusing on rape, torture, and atrocities against civilians. A social and historical analysis of the conflict in Liberia, which lasted from 1989 to 1997, examined how Liberia had descended into conflict and why it took such a violent form. The author suggested that the causes were not only political but could be explained in religious or spiritual terms. Impoverished young men who attacked people, boasting of eating human hearts, were performed in the familiar language of secret society rituals now out of control. Ritual murders were no longer carried out by officers of established cults, such as the Poro society, but by unqualified adolescents, their quest for power fulfilled by the consumption of the vital organs of others (Ellis 1995: 165-6; Ellis

2006).

Debating cannibalism

For several decades, beginning in the late 1970s, the topic of cannibalism was at the centre of three well-publicised anthropological debates. Marvin Harris (1977) proposed that the endless varieties of cultural behaviour can be explained as adaptations to particular ecological conditions, a materialist theory adopted by Harris from the work of Michael Harner (1977). Anthropophagy was thus said to be a rational response to the shortage of protein, which resulted in the slaughter of war captives by Aztecs during times of famine, for example. The statement that cannibalism was a form of meat consumption was a constant theme in the anthropological literature, and the question of whether it had relevant nutritional value was investigated. For tropical people living at low-medium population densities exploiting a diverse range of [animal](#) foods, the answer was yes (Dornstreich & Morren 1974). For prehistoric cannibalism, probably not, as the value of human meat compared unfavourably with the nutritional value of huge animals, such as mammoths consumed during Paleolithic times (Cole 2017).

Critics of materialist approaches argued that it left out that ‘the practical function of institutions is never adequate to explain their cultural structure’ (Sahlins 1978: 45). Theories such as the one by Harris were held to be also at fault for reducing human populations to being *quantities* rather than *societies*, consisting primarily of organisms with biological requirements rather than people with cultural interests. Utilitarian explanations of cannibalism and of human behaviour more broadly may thus falsely incorporate meanings other people give to their lives within the kind of material rationalisations that we might give to our own (Sahlins 1979: 53). Harris’ approach to cannibalism and human behaviour stood accused of a ‘bourgeois’ conflation of the *more or less efficacious* ways that people maintain themselves with the *optimising* or *maximising* behaviour characteristic of enterprise.

A second debate around cannibalism arose first over the question of how we were to understand the death of Captain Cook at the hands of the Hawaiians in 1779 and, in particular, whether Cook was perceived by some of them to be a manifestation of their god Lono. The anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (1995) argued that upon arrival, Hawaiian priests objectified Cook as the said god of growth, reproduction, and fertility. Thus, Sahlins held that Cook’s violent death just a few weeks after his arrival, when he was trying to abduct the local king, should be understood with reference to local ritual and metaphysics. Sahlins defended the view that there are distinct cultures, each with a total cultural system of human action, and that they are to be understood on their own terms.

This view was challenged by Gananath Obeyesekere (1992a), who argued that Hawaiian natives likely never considered Cook to be a god. Myth might have been at play in his encounter with Hawaiians, but the myth is a European one that propagates ideas of a redoubtable European travelling to ‘savage’ lands as the

harbinger of civilisation. Discourses about Cook might thus reveal more about the [relations](#) between Europeans and other peoples than about the nature of anthropophagy (Obeyesekere 1992b; Barker, Hulme & Iversen 1998). Obeyesekere's interpretation of events relied on the wider approach to studying socio-cultural phenomena, in which people's actions and beliefs are assumed to pursue particular, practical functions in their lives that should be understood along psychological lines.

Sahlins (2003) returned to the debate years later, arguing that cannibalism in the Pacific was a complex phenomenon whose myriad attributes were acquired by its relation to a variety of 'elements of society', and that anthropologists had to be as wary of exaggerated accounts of cannibalism that stand in the service of imperialism as they had to be of a baseless denial of cannibalism practice that romanticises the people under study. The Lono story, which depicts the body of Captain Cook dismembered and parts of it possibly eaten, posed a question, fundamental to anthropology, about how to understand non-Western cultures. Cannibalism as a practice or an accusation has the mark of the greatest imaginable cultural difference, and is thus the greatest challenge to our categories of understanding (Hulme 1998: 20-1). Obeyesekere and Sahlins together are said to have posed - in a way they could never have done separately - fundamental theoretical questions and had raised critical methodological issues with respect to the delicate business of 'other-knowing' (Geertz 1995).

A third debate began soon after Arens published *The man-eating myth* (1979), a book that attracted the attention of anthropologists and the popular press. Arens said that, excluding survival conditions, he had been unable to uncover adequate documentation of cannibalism as a custom in any form for any society. Rumours, suspicions, fears, and accusations abound, but no satisfactory first-hand accounts exist (Arens 1979: 21).

Anthropologists were quick to respond with *The ethnography of cannibalism*, edited by Paula Brown and Donald Tuzin (1983) and *The anthropology of cannibalism* (1999) edited by Laurence Goldman. Arens' critique received some support. Michael Pickering's essay in the Goldman volume, for example, had asserted that there was no evidence to support the claim that Australian aboriginal societies had engaged in cannibalism. The sources relied upon were said to be of poor quality, with a paucity of evidence. The majority of reports were based on innocent misunderstanding and misinterpretation, or on deliberate lies and attempts to belittle, denigrate, and dehumanise Aboriginal people, usually as a prelude to denying them basic [human rights](#) and usurping their lands (Pickering 1999: 51-68). Overall, however, Goldman observed that the great number of studies from the region published after WWII provided the tombstone for Arens' denial of cannibalism.

Arens' hypothesis also received criticism from scholars working in South America. Neil Whitehead (2008) provided reliable historical evidence of cannibalism among the Caribs and other Indian groups in the 'New World'. In response to Arens' assertion that people alleged to be cannibals always deny it, Beth Conklin

(2001: 22) argued that the Wari' told her that they once ate human flesh, and talked about it in detail. She also provided a detailed record of endocannibalism in Lowland South America (Conklin 2001: xxiv-v). Anthropologists working in Africa were also critical of reducing the accounts of anthropophagy to the inventions of missionaries and other Westerners. There was evidence that the Maka in Cameroon had ritual prohibitions that allowed only adult men, elders, and champions of war to eat human flesh (Geschiere 1997: 235). Making the authenticated Western eyewitness the yardstick of the reality of cannibalism risked falling back on a position of Eurocentrism which Arens had originally contested (Behrend 2011). The debate about the existence of cannibalism was also one about the nature of anthropological evidence. Arens held that people's descriptions of their own practices could not be trusted, a strict definition of evidence that many anthropologists challenged. Several others defended that proving or denying cannibalism should not depend on direct observation as many intimate and forbidden behaviours tended to be conducted in secret (Brady 1982). Contrary to the assertion that no one had ever observed cannibalism, Peggy Sanday (1986: 9-10) cited reliable eyewitness reports of the Jesuits in South America, and a missionary's description of the practice during a war in the Cook Islands in 1897. Ultimately, Arens presented his 'somewhat revised thoughts' on the topic in a book in which the contributors discussed the discourse of cannibalism rather than cannibalism itself (Hulme 1998: 16). The controversy had usefully heightened both scholarly awareness of the ideological potential of 'cannibalism' and empirical rigor in studies of cannibalism as a culturally embedded, institutionalised practice (Tuzin 2001: 1454).

Conclusion: The future of the cannibal

This entry has discussed cannibalism in places where the practice was recent, and people who ate the dead could provide detailed information. The reports of cannibalism in Papua New Guinea, South America, and Africa had presented seemingly boundless accounts of the practice. However, anthropologists were said to have been unsuccessful in disturbing or unsettling Western systems of knowledge, and there was insufficient treatment of cannibalism as a theory-building part of Western [science](#) (Ernst 1999: 155). Types of literal cannibalism were also said to vary according to motive and circumstance, the diversity so great that it tended to overwhelm the common feature of ingestion and to confound efforts to understand cannibalism as a unitary phenomenon (Tuzin 2001: 1453).

And yet, a new way to think about cannibalism has recently emerged (Nyamnjoh 2018), expanding the definition of the practice to include both the actual eating of human flesh and fantasies of eating other humans, being eaten by other humans, and being seen to eat other humans. Eating is here understood in its most inclusive and elastic sense to imply consumption in general, directly and indirectly, actually, symbolically, metaphorically, and in fantasy (2018: 73). Incorporating perspectives from the Global South, Francis Nyamnjoh developed the key observation that to feed on someone's life chances may be tantamount to feeding on someone's flesh. He considers humans to be fundamentally incomplete and

cannibalistic, a condition of the powerful no less than of those they prey upon. Nyamnjoh thereby provides an alternative to the identity-obsessed ethics and politics of the twentieth century (Englund 2018: x), one that leaves room for the possibility of a common humanity and equal access to human dignity. It was cannibalism's ubiquity and capacity for presence in simultaneous entities and multiplicities that pushed Claude Levi-Strauss (1960) to argue that, in one form or another 'we are all cannibals', 'whether or not the humans we consume are served through our palates, injected, inserted as transplants or grafted onto our bodies' (Nyamnjoh 2018: 6). As a reflection of our moral sense of self, the concept of the cannibal seems destined to remain with us forever.

Notes

This entry is an extension of topics covered in Lindenbaum (2015a).

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[1] Later ethnographic research about the handling of contaminated tissue did not support the likelihood of self-inoculation by oral, nasal, and conjunctival routes during mortuary feasts (Whitfield *et al.* 2008; Whitfield 2015). A detailed account of the sequence of events that led to the cannibalism hypothesis, as well as the different ways in which anthropologists and medical investigators studied the disease, was published by Lindenbaum (2013; 2015a; 2015b).

[2] The father's brother is often classified as a father in patrilineal kinship systems.

[3] See also Ernst (1999: 156) on the reluctance of anthropologists in Papua New Guinea.