Biasing Cannibalism in Anthropology

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Introduction

The treatment of cannibalism in anthropology is in a state between myth and reality due to an unresolved debate surrounding the validity of its existence. From one perspective, investigators such as Arens (1979:109, 182) posit that belief in the existence of cannibalism is based on second hand information, not by actually witnessing the practice; and constitutes a myth without any historic reality. Other investigators have speculated that osteological evidence illustrates cannibalism as a form of perimortem terrorism associated with socio-political control (Kantner 1999:37). In modernity cannibalism has occurred as recently as the 1970’s, when a group of rugby players were forced to partake in cannibalism as a matter of survival, after a plane crash in the Andes (Lee 2008:D8). Some ethnographers have also documented interviews of individuals who formerly practiced cannibalism based on the compassionate treatment of the dead to help the living cope with the loss of a loved one (Conklin 2001:234-235).

The rejection of some cannibalism forms while accepting others calls into question the ability of anthropologists to approach the subject objectively. Arens states, "the significant question is not why people eat human flesh, but why one group invariably assumes that others do," (1979:139). I suggest that Arens is wrong. I suggest there are two significant questions both related to his position. The first significant question is not why one group invariably assumes that others eat human flesh, but why one group assumes that others will not. The second question is precisely what he dismisses; why would people eat human flesh?

Perhaps the answer to both questions lies in the naivety of people towards cannibalism in general. Christy Turner, an expert on cannibalism has said, "That which we know little or nothing about is commonly disbelieved, and sometimes considered a dangerous and taboo subject," (Turner 2008:17). Therefore, it is a matter of education, and regarding cannibalism, there are two important points to consider. First, cannibalism exists in two forms: endocannibalism, which is the eating of individuals from within one's own social group; and exocannibalism, which is the eating of individuals who do not belong to the social group (Turner and Turner 1999:460). Second, cannibalism is commonly portrayed in Western culture by the latter form. It is my contention that by contrasting terror and survivor cannibalism against mortuary cannibalism, it will be shown that the disbelief in cannibalism is a product of Western biases towards exocannibalism.

Establishing Danger and Taboo: Initial Exposure to Cannibalism within Western Culture

Perhaps the first introduction that many western or westernized cultures will have with cannibalism occurs in the presentation of children's literature. In
stories such as the Brothers Grimm version of the folk tale *Hansel and Gretel*; a witch entraps and enslaves two siblings so she can consume the flesh of the boy Hansel. After childhood, continued exposure to negative imagery of cannibalism through pop culture and literature is almost unavoidable. Films such as *Silence of the Lambs* and the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* associate the acts of cannibalism to violence against individuals, derived from a need among perpetrators to consume human flesh. Gruesome apocalyptic zombie stories portray the consumption of human flesh as the result of a perversion or demonization of the human being, where they have lost their ability to function as civilized people due to their state of undeath. In fiction, *vampirism* is a more esoteric form of cannibalism through the consumption of human blood, with biting imagery often replicating and perverting the Christian Eucharist due to the influence of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, where vampirism is the consequence of renouncing of faith and denouncing the church.

In all cases discussed above, cannibalism is presented as fiction, and further, it is being associated with evil, or at the very least an absence of good. Importantly, when an individual considers what information about cannibalism popular culture has provided them, it is easy to recognize that the reader or the viewer is generally has the same cultural identity as the protagonists, who seek to destroy the cannibal.

Further, the perpetrators of cannibalism are depicted as the 'other', which reciprocally makes the reader or viewer the 'other' to the perpetrator, and thus all cannibalism portrayed in popular culture are examples of exocannibalism. I posit that the continual and perpetual portrayals of exocannibalism in pop culture inherently aid in the disbelief of cannibalism, due to their fictive and evil nature.

Part of the problem in removing the fictive and evil stigma from cannibalism is due to past problems of observer reliability. The presentation of past accounts of cannibalism, such as those by Hans Staden in the 16th century, are laden with inconsistencies such as Staden's comprehending a South American cannibals speech about their intentions to eat him the first day they are encountered (Kolata 1986:1498). Even in the twentieth century that reports of cannibalism related to the Kuru outbreak in Papua New Guinea are treated as untrue, on the basis that the researcher did not actually witness the cannibalism to document the occurrence (Kolata 1986:1498-1499). Even when photos of dismembered bodies are provided as evidence of cannibalism, they are delegated by researchers of the anti-cannibalism position to be photos of a murder victim, rather than as part of a cannibal meal (Kolata 1986:1499).

Are they just stories? Usually there is a small amount of truth to stories. The Germanic association of the witch to cannibalism is not specific to Hansel and Gretel. Frankish law from the sixth century limited fines for witches who consumed flesh to two hundred *solidi*, which apparently was not enough of a deterrent, since an edict was required in 643 A.D. to prevent the burning of women that people felt had committed cannibalism (Tannahill 1975:96-97). However, witnesses to cannibalism have been interviewed, and there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of their accounts. Robert Klitzman, a medical doctor and researcher, spent time in Papua New Guinea studying Kuru, an encephalopathic disease that can take up to decades to manifest (Klitzman 1998:3-6). By interviewing a woman who was old enough to have witnessed a cannibalistic feast, he was able to determine why cannibalism in Papua New Guinea had
stopped by the time of the Kuru outbreaks: islanders who practiced cannibalism in prior years were put in jail by the authorities, so the practice eventually stopped (Klitzman 1998:160).

Exocannibalism: Giving Cannibalism a Bad Name

Unfortunately, exposure to cannibalism in the Americas has historically been through accounts like those of Staden (see above). The portrayal of savages perpetrating cannibalism is also unfortunately reinforced when legitimate research on exocannibalism is presented. Two examples, the Anasazi people from the American Southwest, and the Wari from Brazil, can be used to demonstrate why it is important to understand why people eat flesh.

The Anasazi are one example from physical anthropology research where evidence points towards cannibalism being used to instil fear. Turner and Turner (1999:460-461) examined osteological remains from the Anasazi region and concluded that the Anasazi conducted cannibalism from about 900 C.E. to about 1300 C.E. as an adaptive behaviour that did not include starvation considerations. The primary reason for exclusion of survival cannibalism was that other groups also have historically lived in the areas where the Anasazi lived, and the records from those groups do not exhibit evidence of cannibalism (Turner and Turner 1999:461). So why did the Anasazi engage in the activity? Turner and Turner (1999:463-470) posit that a migration of some individuals from Mexico at approximately 900 C.E. brought the practices of ritual sacrifice and cannibalism to the Anasazi region. In order to survive, those immigrants implemented the practices as a means of intimidation and social control; which eventually led to the adoption of the practice in order to maintain social order in the Chaco Anasazi region (Turner and Turner 1999:463-470).

Further, exocannibalism has been practiced by the Wari culture of Brazil as an adaptive strategy to prevent intruders into their own lands (Conklin 2001:31). According to Beth Conklin (2001:31-33), Wari war parties historically would slay those who entered their territory, and further, would travel long distances to kill enemies and prevent any retaliations upon themselves (Conklin 2001:31-32). In Wari beliefs, if an individual witnesses or takes part in the slaying of an enemy, that individual, in a way, consumes the spirit of the enemy who has been killed, and as a result they have become blood-relatives (Conklin 2001:32-33). The result of the blood-relative relation prevents the warrior party, and witnesses, from actually partaking of the flesh, since there is a Wari taboo against eating flesh of a blood-relative (Conklin 2001:32-33). However, the remains of the victim can be consumed by the others of the Wari encampment, allowing those who were not witness to join in the celebration of victory over their enemies (Conklin 2001:32-33).

Therefore, in the first example, exocannibalism was used to maintain control over the inferior group by the Mexican immigrants and their descendents. In the second example, exocannibalism was used to reinforce social bonds within the Wari culture. In both examples, those outside the group of cannibalism practitioners are the victims of violence against them, which is consistent with the relationship between cannibal and flesh typically portrayed in Western culture. Thus, in addition to the stigmatization of evil and fiction, cannibalism is also now associated with negative connotations of predation.
Additional Negative Connotations: The 'C' Word.

Despite accounts such as Dr. Klitzman’s witness interview discussed in the first part of this paper, cannibalism researchers in the twenty-first century still have to contend with the negative connotations given to cannibalism. Among some anthropologists, cannibalism as a topic has become taboo, a position which has undoubtedly increased due to the writing of Arens, to the point of even being referred to as “the ‘C’ word” in some anthropological communities (Turner 2008:18). Further, additional contexts are now associated with cannibalism based on the exocannibalism model. Two new forms of exocannibalism now exist through the ‘cultural other’ in western discourses as metaphors for economic and colonial predatory behaviours (Lindenbaum 2004:476).

With the position of exocannibalism established, it is now time to turn to the discussion of Endocannibalism. The ‘why’ of endocannibalism behaviours is ignored by Western culture in favour of disbelief. It is ignored because endocannibalism is incongruent with our perceptions of cannibalism as a as a violent and terrible act.

Survival Cannibalism: When a Life is On the Line

One single form of cannibalism appears to be universally agreed upon as fact: survival cannibalism. The most well known historical case is the Donner Party, which was forced to undertake cannibalism to live after becoming trapped in the Sierra Nevada mountains during a snowstorm in 1846 (Lindenbaum 2004:477). Another well known case is the Uruguay rugby players caught in a plane crash on their way to Santiago in Chile; forced to live by eating the deceased until they were rescued from the mountain glacier (Lee 2008). Additionally there is the case of Alferd Packer, who ate deceased members of his entourage while stranded in a blizzard in Colorado during 1883 (Lindenbaum 2004:477).

In all the prior cases, the consumption of human flesh is considered a consequence of unfortunate and adverse conditions (Lindenbaum 2004:477). Consequently, they are not treated as untrue. Yet the consumption of individuals within these survival cannibalism examples took place within the group. Therefore these cannibalic histories are examples of endocannibalism. The willingness to accept endocannibalism in a survival form demonstrates that even individuals who do not believe in cannibalism can logically see its necessity in some situations. The question then becomes: why do individuals not recognize that other needs beyond life threatening subsistence could also be a factor?

Mortuary Cannibalism

Mortuary cannibalism is the accepted and moral institutionalized practice of consuming the dead within an ego’s own social group (Conklin 2001:89). Because the practice occurs within the group, it is a form of endocannibalism. The practice of mortuary cannibalism, from the following examples, is a way that practitioners reinforce the social connections between surviving members of a family, or extended family, after the death of a loved one.

The Papua New Guinea Fore People

The Papua New Guinea Fore practiced cannibalism as part of their mortuary practices. Klitzman (1998:5) found through discussion with fore informants, that when an individual died, a
female loved one would prepare the body for consumption by cutting it into portions, wrap it into bamboo tubes or banana leaves, and then steam the pieces of the body so they could be eaten. As to why the Fore would ingest a deceased family member, one woman explained to Klitzman, "I will now always have a part of my mother inside me," (Klitzman 1998:5). In this way, the Fore has found a method to maintain a permanent relationship with the deceased.

To denounce the Fore position, it would have to be claimed that the Fore are just eating meat, as opposed to partaking of the decedent’s identity. The separation of body and spirit is a popular view in many religions, but should not be universally applied to all cultures. Anthropologists especially should be sensitive to cultural differences.

By the time anthropologists were in Papua New Guinea studying the Fore in the 1950’s, the practice of mortuary cannibalism had officially stopped. Yet according to Fore informants it was still happening discretely in the South, so as to hide the practice from the government (Lindenbaum 2008:3717). The Fore practice was to digest portions of all body parts except the gall bladder, with an exception that death by certain diseases would preclude a body from being eaten (Lindenbaum 2008:3717).

During that time another matter among the Fore was being investigated. Kuru, a devastating prion disease similar to scrapie and bovine spongiform encephalitis (Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease), was moving quickly through the Fore population in Papua New Guinea (Lindenbaum 2001:365). The spread of Kuru was found to be a vector of cannibalism, being spread by consumption of diseased tissue, and found to have a very long incubation period (Lindenbaum 2001:368). However, the spread of Kuru is not associated with the consumption of infected tissue of loved ones by the Fore. Rather, they feel that Kuru is the work of sorcery (Klitzman 1998:160). Despite the effects of the devastating disease, the Fore did not stop cannibalism due to the spread of Kuru, they stopped cannibalism due to the constraints of the law (Klitzman 1998:160).

Among the Fore, the practice of cannibalism is a way of maintaining relationships with the deceased beyond what is possible in the physical world; and the emphasis on understanding endocannibalism among the Fore should reflect this aspect. The fact that cannibalism was stopped by the influence of the law before researchers could document it - in ways that would suit the anthropologists of the anti-cannibalism position - is completely irrelevant to the argument against the validity of endocannibalism as a social practice.

**The Wari**

The Wari believe that the body of the individual is their identity (Conklin 2001:114,157). Wari consume the dead of the group out of compassion (Conklin 2001:96). When an individual died within Wari culture, it was custom for the affines to consume the roasted flesh of the individual, and it was considered an insult to the family if the affines did not, since they would be insulting dead persons memory (Conklin 2001:xvi-xvii). The rationale being consumption was an obligation of the affines for two reasons. First, the eating of a consanguine is incompatible with grief, and second, eating a consanguine is the same as eating yourself, which is a taboo (Conklin 2001:122). It is felt among the Wari that a corpse reminds those who are still alive of the loved one they have lost; by eating the corpse the consanguines are spared grief (Conklin 2001:xix). The removal of grief by the consumption of the corpse is not the only method for removing the memory.
Cremation often occurs to valuables of the individual since the material belongings were part of the Wari identity (Conklin 2001:159). The burning of the individuals valuables was to spare the living of dwelling on the dead (Conklin 2001:159), which is an act of compassion. Further, the consumption of the dead allowed for the Wari to reduce the psychological effects of death, since the dead individual is still providing for his or her group (Conklin 2001:229). Thus, the practice of mortuary cannibalism for the Wari allows them to reinforce social bonds with the affines of the family, and to bring the group closer together with the deceased, by allowing the deceased to provide for them one last time.

Criticism

The primary criticisms against the practice of endocannibalism, as discussed in the first portion of this essay, are that researchers were not witness to the events themselves. Thus the practice of cannibalism is treated as untrue. It is interesting to note that western legal systems treat the testimonies of witnesses as valid and true; yet when it comes to cannibalism, anti-cannibalism anthropologists refute the information based on no anthropologist having witnessed it.

Conclusion

Why does one group assume that others will not eat flesh? Lindenbaum (2004:480) notes that, "cannibal typologies remain lodged within categories emerging from our own culture and institutions," and that, "the common factor in the history of cannibal allegations is the combination of denial in ourselves and attribution of it to those we wish to defame, conquer, and civilize," (Lindenbaum 2004:491). Western culture produces a bias towards cannibalism through popular media. Initial exposures to cannibalism treat the practice in a negative way, and invariably end with the protagonist seeking to destroy the cannibal. Cannibalism is treated as evil. In some cases of exocannibalism, such as when it is used to dominate and control others, perhaps it is.

Yet the willingness to accept cannibalism when it is needed for survival demonstrates that human needs can be met by the practice. To assume that only biological needs are important enough to validate cannibalism is to denounce the needs of individual, and the needs of the larger social group. The anti-cannibalism position needs to look very closely at why cannibalism is practiced. Mortuary practices of cannibalism serving human need are just as valid as biological ones. If we can validate survival cannibalism based on biological needs, we should certainly be able to validate cannibalism based on emotional and social needs.

The Fore, poorly treated by the anti-cannibal anthropologists, ate the dead as a way of maintaining a personal relationship with the deceased. They will always have part of their loved one inside of them. The Wari also meet social needs, but in the respect of removing the deceased from their memory to ease grief and psychological pain. The only reason that individuals would deny the Fore or the Wari their practices, is because they are attempting to impose their own beliefs upon these groups instead of observing and understanding them for what they are: acts of compassion. It is because of these reason I believe that the disbelief in cannibalism is a result of western biases against exocannibalism.

References Cited


