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978-0-521-31114-4 - Divine Hunger: Cannibalism as a Cultural System

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Excerpt

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Introduction

1 · Cannibalism cross-culturally

In recent years . . . cultural anthropologists have . . . begun to give the topic [cannibalism] serious analytic attention. This development stems partly from the discovery of new facts and partly from the realization that cannibalism – like incest, aggression, the nuclear family, and other phenomena of universal human import – is a promising ground on which to exercise certain theoretical programs.¹

Anthropological debate on the subject of cannibalism has revolved around three theoretical programs, each of which provides a distinctly different lens for viewing the details of cannibalism. Psychogenic hypotheses explain cannibalism in terms of the satisfaction of certain psychosexual needs. The materialist hypothesis presents a utilitarian, adaptive model – people adapt to hunger or protein deficiency by eating one another. The third approach follows a hermeneutical path rather than a hypothetico-deductive model in conceptualizing cannibal practice as part of the broader cultural logic of life, death, and reproduction.

In this chapter I show that cannibalism is not a unitary phenomenon but varies with respect to both cultural meaning and cultural content. Cannibalism is never just about eating but is primarily a medium for nongustatory messages – messages having to do with the maintenance, regeneration, and, in some cases, the foundation of the cultural order. In statistical terms, cannibalism can be tied to hunger, but hunger is not necessarily tied to cannibalism (see discussion of Table 5 in this chapter). The job of analysis, I suggest, requires a synthetic approach, one that examines how material and psychogenic forces are encompassed by cultural systems. We must look, as Geertz says, at how generic potentialities (and, I

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would add, concerns stemming from material realities) are focused in specific performances.²

The complexity of cannibal practice cross-culturally

The discussion that follows is based on an examination of the sample of 156 societies I employed in an earlier study of female power and male dominance. This group offers scholars a representative sample of the world's known and best-described societies. The time period for the sample societies ranges from 1750 B.C. (Babylonians) to the late 1960s. These societies are distributed relatively evenly among the six major regions of the world as defined by cross-cultural anthropologists. Additionally, the societies represented vary in level of political complexity and type of subsistence technology.³

Of the 156 societies examined, 109 yielded information that I deemed sufficient enough to judge whether cannibalism could be classified as present or absent. One-third (34 percent) of this sample yielded information indicating the presence of cannibalism. Descriptions of cannibalism come from several types of sources: interviews with people who have observed cannibalistic practices in their own society; eyewitness accounts left by missionaries; tribal traditions; and accounts of travelers. Reports of cannibalism are unevenly distributed in various cultural areas of the world. Most come from North America and the Pacific Islands, with reports from Africa and South America being next in the order of frequency. Only two cases have been reported in the Circum-Mediterranean area and no cases have been reported for the whole of East Eurasia (see Table 1).

The descriptions of cannibalism can be classified according to three general categories: (1) ritual cannibalism is practiced, that is, human flesh is regularly consumed in ritual settings; (2) ritual cannibalism is not reported but institutionalized cannibalism is mentioned in other contexts (i.e., reports of famine, reports of past practice, legend, or hearsay); (3) ritual cannibalism is not reported, but fantasized incidents of cannibalism are feared and take the form of belief in cannibal sorcerers or witches.

A variety of themes appear in reports of cannibalism. The role of hunger is frequently mentioned, and most people believe that cannibalism may occur during times of extreme hunger and fa-

*Cannibalism cross-culturally*Table 1. *Geographical distribution of reports of cannibalism*

Geographical area	Cannibalism				Row totals	
	Present		Absent		No.	%
	No.	%	No.	%		
Sub-Saharan Africa	7	47	8	53	15	100
Circum-						
Mediterranean	2	15	11	85	13	100
East Eurasia	0	0	23	100	23	100
Insular Pacific	11	52	10	48	21	100
North America	11	48	12	52	23	100
South and Central						
America	6	43	8	57	14	100
Column totals	37 (34%)		72 (66%)		109 (100%)	

mine. However, hunger cannibalism is generally treated as revolting and reprehensible, the ultimate antisocial act, in some cases punishable by death. Tuzin provides an excellent description of this attitude in his discussion of the Arapesh response to Japanese hunger cannibalism as the ultimate unthinkable act, one that implied a deranged, anguished abandonment of humanity.⁴ Tuzin also mentions, however, that other groups in New Guinea treated hunger cannibalism as commonplace.⁵

The food value of human flesh is referred to in many reports from the Pacific. It is not clear, however, whether such reports are the authors' fantasy or actual fact. Quoting from a nineteenth-century account, Sahlins notes that Fijian chiefs of the last century did not regard the human victim "in the shape of food," since cannibalism was "a custom intimately connected with the whole fabric of their society." Nevertheless these chiefs told the Europeans "that they indulged in eating (human flesh) because their country furnished nothing but pork, being destitute of beef and all other kinds of meat."⁶ Reports from the Pacific commonly equate human with animal flesh. The Orokaiva gave as their reason for consuming human flesh their "desire for good food." All victims acquired in an intertribal raid were consumed. Human corpses were handled as if they were animals slain in the hunt. Corpses of grown men were tied by their hands and feet to a pole and carried face downward. Slain children were slung over the warrior's shoul-

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der in the manner of a hunter carrying a dead wallaby, with each hand of the body tied to each foot.⁷ Lindenbaum reports that the Fore equated pigs and humans and applied the Melanesian pigdin term for meat and small game to the human flesh consumed by women.⁸ Despite the reputed equation of human flesh with meat in some cases, the actual consumption in these cases has cultural connotations beyond gustatory considerations. For example, among the Orokaiva the primary reason for acquiring cannibal victims in intertribal raids was to compensate for the spirit of an Orokaiva man killed in such a raid. Fore concepts revolved around the notion that human meat, like pig flesh, helps some humans regenerate.

In many reports, the events associated with cannibalism refer not to hunger but to the physical control of chaos. For example, the victim is cast as the living metaphor for animality, chaos, and the powers of darkness – all those things people feel must be tamed, destroyed, or assimilated in the interest of an orderly social life. Cannibalism is then associated with a destructive power that must be propitiated or destroyed, and the act of propitiation or destruction is directly tied to social survival. The power is variously located. It may be within animals or enemies, or may be harbored as a basic instinct in humans. When projected onto enemies, cannibalism and torture become the means by which powerful threats to social life are dissipated. To revenge the loss of one's own, the victim taken in warfare is tortured and reduced to food in the ultimate act of domination. At the same time, by consuming enemy flesh one assimilates the animus of another group's hostile power into one's own.

Other reports tie cannibalism to a basic human instinct that must be controlled for the sake of internal social survival. In these cases cannibalism provides an idiom for deranged and antisocial behavior. For example, in their most secret and supernaturally powerful ritual society, the Bella Coola performed a Cannibal Dance in which they enacted their view of human nature. The Bella Coola believed that during the performance of this ritual the cannibal dancer became possessed by an animal force that caused the dancer to want to bite people and filled him or her with an insatiable desire for human flesh.⁹ This force was controlled in the dancer with ropes, bathing, and a droning kind of singing.¹⁰ The close connection between the cannibal dancer and the Bella Coola

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gods adds a supernatural dimension to the Bella Coola perception of the cannibal instinct of humans. In staging the cannibal ritual, the Bella Coola found a way to channel powerful forces into society and to order those forces for social purposes.

Human sacrifice with its associated cannibalism was the means by which the Aztec gained access to the animating forces of the universe. For the Aztec “the flowing of blood [was] equivalent to the motion of the world.” “Human sacrifice,” Sahlins says, “was . . . a cosmological necessity in the Aztec scheme, a condition of the continuation of the world.”¹¹ The Aztec feared that when the gods became hungry their destructive powers would be unleashed against humanity. To keep the mystical forces of the universe in balance and to uphold social equilibrium, the Aztec fed their gods human flesh. By the act of consecration the sacrificial victims were incarnated as gods. Through eating the victim’s flesh, men entered into communion with their gods, and divine power was imparted to men.

Exocannibalism (the cannibalism of enemies, slaves, or victims captured in warfare), characterizes the majority of cases. In the few instances of endocannibalism (the cannibalism of relatives) human flesh is a physical channel for communicating social value and procreative fertility from one generation to the next among a group of humans tied to one another by virtue of sharing certain substances with common ancestors. Endocannibalism recycles and regenerates social forces that are believed to be physically constituted in bodily substances or bones at the same time that it binds the living to the dead in perpetuity.

These sketchy descriptions illustrate the diversity in the cultural content of cannibal practice. More recent ethnographic descriptions of cannibalism reach the same conclusion. Even within the same society, cannibalism may be diversely constituted, as Poole’s description of Bimin-Kuskusmin cannibalism illustrates. For Bimin-Kuskusmin,

the idea of cannibalism implicates a complex amalgam of practice and belief, history and myth, and matter-of-fact assertion or elaborate metaphor. The subject enters into crass sexual insults, ribald jokes, and revered sacred oratory. It is displayed in the plight of famine, the anguish of mourning, and the desperation of insanity. It marks aspects of the social life-cycle from the impulses of the unborn to the ravages of the ancestors. It is projected outward as a feature of the ethnic landscape and

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inward as an idiom of dreams, possession states, and other personal fantasy formations. In different contexts it may be seen as an inhuman, ghoulish nightmare or as a sacred, moral duty. But always it is encompassed by the order of ritual and the tenor of ambivalence. The Bimin-Kuskusmin have no single term for “cannibalism,” for the ideas that are implicated are constructed for particular purposes of discourse that emphasize different dimensions of the phenomenon.¹²

The complexity of cannibalism as a cultural practice means that to reduce it to a dichotomous variable robs it of all cultural content.¹³ Nevertheless I proceed with this exercise as a means for determining whether the kinds of exogenous forces posited by material and psychogenic hypotheses are statistically associated with the practice of consuming human flesh. In doing so I do not intend to suggest that culture must conform to material constraints, but rather, as Sahlins states, “that it does so according to a definite symbolic scheme which is never the only one possible.”¹⁴ Thus, if hunger is a material force to be reckoned with in societies practicing cannibalism, as Table 5 suggests, I argue that we must look at the effects of hunger and ask how these effects are culturally constituted. The fact that hunger is just as likely to be present in societies that do not practice cannibalism demonstrates Sahlins’s point that more than one symbolic order may constitute the effects of a given material force. Thus, hunger is encompassed by a cultural order that includes cannibal practice in some cases and by some other symbolic scheme, which may or may not include a physical referent to eating, in others.

The information presented in Tables 1–5 is based solely on reports of cannibalism falling in the category of institutionalized cannibalism. Reports of cannibalism as fantasy, as a past event, or as a periodic occurrence during times of famine are not included. The reason for limiting the cases to the purported regular consumption of human flesh derives from the stipulations on the data posed by the materialist hypothesis. Since the main causal variable posited by the materialist explanation is the ongoing satisfaction of hunger or protein deficiency, obviously the data must reflect actual as opposed to fantasized or infrequent consumption of human flesh. (In subsequent chapters, this restriction on the data will not apply and the discussion will include the fear of cannibalism, whether or not cannibalism is thought to be actually practiced. Additionally, in these chapters I will not be concerned with whether the consump-

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tion of human flesh actually takes place, because my focus will be on interpreting the rituals in which human flesh is purportedly consumed.)

The requirement that the data reflect actual instances of cannibalism brings to mind Arens's charge that since "no one has ever observed this purported cultural universal," we must be skeptical about its actual existence.¹⁵ A search of the literature convinces me that Arens overstates his case. Although he is correct in asserting that the attribution of cannibalism is sometimes a projection of moral superiority, he is incorrect in arguing that cannibalism has never existed. Contrary to his assertion that no one has ever observed cannibalism, reliable eyewitness reports do exist. In response to Arens, Sahlins excerpts some of the nineteenth-century eyewitness reports from the journals of Pacific travelers.¹⁶ Additionally, eyewitness reports presented in *The Jesuit Relations* contradict Arens's assertion that "[t]he collected documents of the Jesuit missionaries, often referred to as the source for Iroquois cruelty and cannibalism, do not contain an eyewitness description of the latter deed."¹⁷

One of the most compelling eyewitness reports I have encountered was penned in 1879 by a native of the Cook Islands who was among the first Polynesian missionaries. Upon learning to write from European missionaries, he kept a log of his travels and wrote many letters, some of which described the consumption of human flesh. One particularly lurid but descriptive example comes from a report of a war that broke out in New Caledonia soon after his arrival there as a missionary.

I followed and watched the battle and saw women taking part in it. They did so in order to carry off the dead. When people were killed, the men tossed the bodies back and the women fetched and carried them. They chopped the bodies up and divided them. . . . When the battle was over, they all returned home together, the women in front and the men behind. The womenfolk carried the flesh on their backs; the coconut-leaf baskets were full up and the blood oozed over their backs and trickled down their legs. It was a horrible sight to behold. When they reached their homes the earth ovens were lit at each house and they ate the slain. Great was their delight, for they were eating well that day. This was the nature of the food. The fat was yellow and the flesh was dark. It was difficult to separate the flesh from the fat. It was rather like the flesh of sheep.

I looked particularly at our household's share; the flesh was dark like

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sea-cucumber, the fat was yellow like beef fat, and it smelt like cooked birds, like pigeon or chicken. The share of the chief was the right hand and the right foot. Part of the chief's portion was brought for me, as for the priest, but I returned it. The people were unable to eat it all; the legs and the arms only were consumed, the body itself was left. That was the way of cannibalism in New Caledonia.¹⁸

More recent eyewitness evidence is reported by Poole, who witnessed acts of Bimin-Kuskusmin mortuary cannibalism and by Tuzin, who describes eyewitness evidence given him by Arapesh informants.¹⁹

The fact that Arens overstates his case should not be taken to mean that the thirty-seven cases of cannibalism reported in Table 1 represent undisputed examples of actual cannibalism. The ethnographies upon which I relied are the best available for use in cross-cultural research based on a standard sample. The data on cannibalism, however, are uneven, ranging from lengthy descriptions of ritual cannibalism reconstructed from informants' recollections of the past to a few sentences describing the consumption of the hearts of enemies. Keeping in mind the problematic nature of the data, the reader is cautioned to look for suggestive trends in the tables rather than irrefutable demonstrations of relationships.

Sagan's psychogenic hypotheses

I begin by considering the hypotheses in Sagan's study of cannibalism that can be examined within a cross-cultural framework. These are not the only dimensions to Sagan's argument. For example, he builds a good case for the role of emotional ambivalence in cannibal practice, an argument I shall return to in Chapter 2, where I suggest that, although Sagan's contribution is important and useful, it is limited by his particular reading of Freud.

Sagan contends that cannibalism "is the elementary form of institutionalized aggression."²⁰ Employing the Freudian frustration-aggression hypothesis and the idea that oral incorporation is the elementary psychological response to anger and frustration, Sagan hypothesizes that cannibalism is characteristic of a primitive stage of social development. "The undeveloped imagination of the cannibal," he says, will deal with frustration through oral aggression, because the cannibal "is compelled to take the urge for oral incor-

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poration literally. He eats the person who, by dying, has abandoned him.”²¹ Or, he eats the enemy whose very existence may deny him strength in order to incorporate that strength into his own body. When it occurs in more advanced social systems, Sagan suggests that cannibalism is a regressive response to social disintegration, for in these cases, he says, “it is inevitable that the satisfaction of aggressive needs sinks to a more primitive level.” This happened in Nazi Germany, “a society in a state of psychotic breakdown.” The civilizing forces broke down under the strain Germany experienced before the Nazis took power. Although not true cannibalism, Sagan says, the destruction of millions of people, the lamp shades of human skin, and similar practices concentrated on the body, exemplify the reversion to primitive aggression.²²

Citing the work of the Whitings, Sagan hypothesizes that extended nursing, a long period of sleeping with the mother, and father absence yield children who are overly dependent on their mothers and hence more prone to frustration and oral aggression. The adult male who carries this unconscious dependence upon infantile and childhood supports and who is also expected to be masculine and brave will need to display his masculinity and his independence of feminine support: “He will eat people, he will kill people, he will make war, he will enslave others, and he will dominate and degrade women.”²³

Sagan’s discussion suggests that as the elementary form of institutionalized aggression, cannibalism will occur among the simpler societies, in advanced societies faced with a disintegrating social identity, and in societies in which infant dependence upon the mother is prolonged. We can frame these suggestions in terms of several variables and correlate them with reports of the presence or absence of cannibalism, admitting, however, that this exercise does not do justice to Sagan’s more complex ideas.

The first variable measures the level of political complexity. Twenty-five of the thirty-seven societies with reported cannibalism are politically homogeneous, meaning that the highest level of jural authority is the local community. Thus, cannibalism is more likely to be present in politically homogeneous than heterogeneous societies (see Table 2). However, this information does not support Sagan’s hypothesis that cannibalism is a primitive form of aggression because of the fact that more than half (56 percent) of