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The practice of cannibalism is in certain cultures rejected as evil, while in others it plays a central part in the ritual order. Anthropologists have offered various explanations for the existence of cannibalism, none of which, Peggy Sanday claims, is adequate. In this book she presents a new approach to understanding the phenomenon. Through a detailed examination of ritual cannibalism in selected tribal societies, and a comparison of those cases with others in which the practice is absent, she shows that cannibalism is closely linked to people's orientation to the world, and that it serves as a concrete device for distinguishing the "cultural self" from the "natural other."

Combining perspectives drawn from the work of Ricoeur, Freud, Hegel, Jung, and symbolic anthropology, Sanday argues that ritual cannibalism is intimately connected both with the constructs by which the origin and continuity of life are understood and assured from one generation to the next and with the way in which that understanding is used to control the vital forces considered necessary for the reproduction of society. She reveals that the presence or absence of cannibalism in a culture derives from basic human attitudes toward life and death, combined with the realities of the material world.

As well as making an original contribution to the understanding of a significant human practice, Sanday also develops a theoretical argument of wider relevance to anthropological analysis in general. The book will appeal to anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, and other readers interested in the function and meaning of cannibalism.

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Divine hunger

Cannibalism as a cultural system

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TO *Frank* AND *Dorothy Reeves*

WITH LOVE AND GRATITUDE

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Preface

> The brothers went on. When they arrived at the shore of the main island, Atu'a'ine said: "Aturamo'a, how shall we go? Shall we look towards the sea?" Said Aturamo'a; "O, no, let us look towards the jungle." Aturamo'a went ahead, deceiving his brother, for he was a cannibal. He wanted to look towards the jungle, so that he might eat men. Aturamo'a went ahead, and his eyes turned towards the jungle. Atu'a'ine turned his eyes, looked over the sea, he spoke: "Why did you deceive me, Aturamo'a? Whilst I am looking towards the sea, you look towards the jungle." Aturamo'a later on returned and came towards the sea. He spoke, "Good, you Atu'a'ine, look towards the sea, I shall look to the jungle!" This man, who sits near the jungle, is a cannibal, the one who sits near the sea is good.
>
> Trobriand Island myth[1]

The Trobriand Island myth of the two brothers was told to Malinowski as an explanation for why some of the peoples of the kula ring are cannibals and others are not. The association between the jungle and cannibalism, on the one hand, and between the sea and abstention from human flesh, on the other, is similar to another myth in which two sisters settle down on an island. One of them faces toward the noncannibal people of the north and she is said to be averse to cannibalism. The other faces toward the cannibal people of the south and she is said to be a cannibal.

This myth and the area from which it comes (the Massim area of Papua New Guinea) touch on the central puzzles addressed in this book. Cast as morally wrong in the Trobriand myth, elsewhere cannibalism is indulged by humans or projected to the realm of the gods whose appetite for human flesh constitutes the ritual order. Thus, a central question here concerns the basis on

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which the practice of cannibalism is rejected as evil in some cases or incorporated in the cycle of ritual in others.

The Trobriand myth differentiates cannibals from noncannibals in terms of a basic orientation to the physical and moral worlds. The brother who looks toward the jungle is a cannibal; the brother who sits on the beach and looks toward the sea "is good." Because cannibalism cannot be separated from a people's orientation to their physical and moral worlds, the second question, closely tied to the first, asks how cannibalism is incorporated in a cultural system so that it is inextricably interwoven with worldview and ethos.

Finally, the islands of the Massim, where the brothers are traveling, are all exposed to occasional periods of drought or famine. The bifurcation in the brothers' orientation illustrates an actual bifurcation in traditional islander responses to hunger and famine. Some are known to react to famine by mounting interisland raids for cannibal victims, a practice that is regularized and that may occur in the absence of famine. Others, like the Trobrianders, understand famine cannibalism but reject its regular practice. Thus, the third question is, Why these different responses to similar circumstances?

The answers to these questions are complex and have led me beyond the usual dialectic of materialist or culturalist interpretations that have characterized the anthropological examination of cannibalism. In this Preface I briefly sketch my overall approach, which is more fully explained in Chapters 1 and 2.

In Chapter 1, I examine some basic issues from a cross-cultural perspective. First, cannibalism is clearly not a unitary phenomenon but varies with respect to both cultural content and meaning. As Poole notes (see Chapter 1), cannibalism may be displayed in the anguish of mourning, it may mark aspects of the life cycle, or it may be projected outwardly to the realm of the gods or inwardly as an idiom of dreams. Additionally, cannibalism may be defined as a monstrous act against society or as a sacred moral duty in the interest of social well-being. Explanations of cannibalism are also diverse. There are psychogenic, materialist, and culturalist interpretations of cannibalism, each of which tends to ignore or reject both the data and the conclusions offered by the others. The significant association I establish in Chapter 1 between the regular experience of hunger, famine, or protein deficiency and cannibal

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practice suggests that material forces cannot be ignored. However, the fact that hunger is just as likely to characterize societies that do not practice cannibalism, such as some of the societies of the Massim, suggests that the materialist explanation is insufficient.

I suggest that ritual cannibalism expresses the ontological structures for being-in-the-world in terms of which humans understand the forces of life and death and use this understanding to control vital forces deemed necessary for the reproduction of society. This approach is guided by Ricoeur's analysis of the primary symbols of evil in his book *The Symbolism of Evil* (see Chapter 2). Just as Ricoeur argues that "symbols give rise to thought," I argue that certain symbols and myths predicate cannibalism. In Chapter 2, I describe the kinds of symbols and myths that predicate the practice of cannibalism. The remaining chapters present the data on which my argument is based. These chapters are divided in two sections. The first section considers the symbolic oppositions that predicate cannibal practice. The second section looks at the myths that charter, transform, or end cannibal practice. This format is similar to that of Ricoeur's book, which is separated into an analysis, first, of the primary symbols of evil and, second, of the myths "of the beginning and the end." This is a workable format for analyzing cannibalism as a cultural system, because the fifteen case studies on which I rely for the empirical analysis can be divided into those in which cannibalism is predicated by symbolic oppositions that are not specifically chartered in the language of myth and those in which cannibalism is chartered or transformed by mythical statements.

In addition to being influenced by Ricoeur's analytic framework in *Symbolism of Evil*, I have been guided by Freud's theory of instincts, Jung's emphasis on the power of certain symbols to formulate and channel inchoate psychological energy, and the symbolic anthropologists' emphasis on the social power of symbols. I suggest that ritual cannibalism is part of a system of symbols that predicates social and individual consciousness by transforming inchoate psychological energy into social channels through the mechanism of identification.

Any attempt to move from the particular to the generic or to take analytic guidelines from diverse explanatory and interpretive paradigms, as I do in this book, requires a note of explanation. Contrary to some current trends in anthropological discourse, my

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approach is to use the comparative method and to seek generalizations. I am as much concerned with explaining cannibal practice as I am with exploring its cultural meaning. In the pursuit of explanation I deduce certain patterns from a reading of the ethnographic particulars in a dialogue with theory. In the pursuit of cultural meaning I draw extensively on a series of fifteen case studies that illuminate the logic of cannibalism. In Chapters 3–9 I first present the ethnographic particulars in a context that illuminates the logic of cannibalism and then from this context I derive a more general explanatory statement.

I suggest that rituals of cannibalism summarize and express an ontology, provide a model for individuation, and control violent emotions. In these rituals the human body is the medium for a conceptual framework – a physiologically based ontology that regulates as it regenerates social, psychological, and, sometimes, cosmological categories. The somatically based ritual symbols of cannibalism stamp the psyche and the social order in ritual acts that transform inchoate psychic energy, formulate self- and social-consciousness and, in some cases, transmit vital essence into social categories. The basic psychological mechanism that seems to be involved here is individuating by physically differentiating oneself from primordial, inchoate energy. Inchoate psychic energy is transformed by projecting inner feelings onto outer persons where the feelings can be clarified and given social form. Usually the rituals are motivated by concerns about the replacement of personnel or about transmitting psychobiological substances from the dead to the living or from humans to the gods.

As for the relationship between cannibalism and hunger or other sources of stress, many societies can be observed in which hunger is severe or there is occasional famine but cannibalism is absent (see Chapters 9 and 10). I suggest that we must look first at the key symbols and oppositions that predicate being. These symbols and oppositions express the postulates by which self is related to the other. In Chapter 2, I describe postulates that imply cannibalism and compare these postulates with others that do not lead to cannibalism.

Because the data are too thin or conjectural, I cannot specify the material realities that participate in the structuring of the innate. It is interesting to note that in protein-deficient areas of New Guinea, men connect the more rapid growth of the female body with the

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idea that the female body is endowed with superior biological power. This idea influences the cultural phrasing of male gender identity formation and has direct bearing on the practice of mortuary cannibalism. I can also say that where humans prey on animals for much of their subsistence needs, the idea of the cannibal predator is likely during times of famine, when parents may prey on children, or during times of social upheaval, when the normal relationships of reciprocity are transgressed. The idea of the cannibal monster seen in some cases suggests the projection of inner fears produced by stressful outer circumstances.

In my argument, ontological considerations take precedence over the utilitarian concerns given priority in the materialist point of view. Such considerations frame a people's response to stress. This is not to say that the environment plays a passive role; indeed, it plays a most active role. As people express a language of emotions in communicating with one another, the lexicon for this language may be inspired by attributes of the external environment as well as by attributes of significant others. It is from this process of communication that the symbols predicating the relationship between self and other emerge. Thus, I suggest that attributes of the environment play largely a symbolic, not utilitarian, role in rituals of cannibalism.

In rendering cannibalism comprehensible, I found it necessary to balance the divergent styles of hermeneutics and hypothetico-deductive explanation. Although I use the basic format of Ricoeur's *Symbolism of Evil*, I go beyond this format when I examine the role of certain symbols in predicating institutionalized cannibalism. In my discussion of the symbolic and psychological phrasing of cannibalism, my use of Freudian and Jungian theory will be evident. Here too, however, I only draw guidelines. It is not my intention to integrate the theories of these diverse thinkers, but to turn to them for inspiration as I forge a framework that is internally consistent and that provides a lens for comprehending the logic of a powerful human image.

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I owe a great deal to the ethnographers whose work is cited in this book. In particular, I want to thank Marshall Sahlins, who sent me a prepublication version of his paper on Fijian cannibalism; Anna Meigs, who shared her then unpublished manuscript on Hua food rules; and Fitz John Porter Poole, who gave me a prepublication version of his analysis of Bimin-Kuskusmin cannibalism. Sahlins's ability to see the social messages and the cultural meaning in the outpouring of blood on the Aztec sacrificial stone or in the traffic of Fijian cannibal victims; Meigs's understanding of the ontological meaning of Hua food; and Poole's firsthand observation of mortuary cannibalism together with his brilliant reconstruction of the Great Pandanus Rite (a ritual involving exocannibalism) significantly shaped my approach.

Early on, when I was struggling through Ricoeur's *Symbolism of Evil,* Stephen Dunning shared with me his then unpublished paper on this book, and we discussed its applicability to my project. Those discussions and his later reading of Chapter 2 helped me to bring Ricoeur's complex thinking into an anthropological focus.

Demaris Wehr's feminist critique of Jung in her Ph.D. dissertation showed me the value of Jung for this project. David Hart's invitation to speak at the Jung Center in Philadelphia provided the opportunity to air and clarify my evolving ideas. Dorothy Reichard patiently listened when I got particularly fed up. I am grateful for the interest these friends showed in this project.

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Despite what I owe to so many others, the final product is my own construction and I, alone, am responsible for its failings. My

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children, Julie and Eric, endured another round of book writing with their usual zest and again participated in the naming of the final product. I dedicate this product to my parents, who are in some ways responsible for it.

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