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The Cannibal Sign

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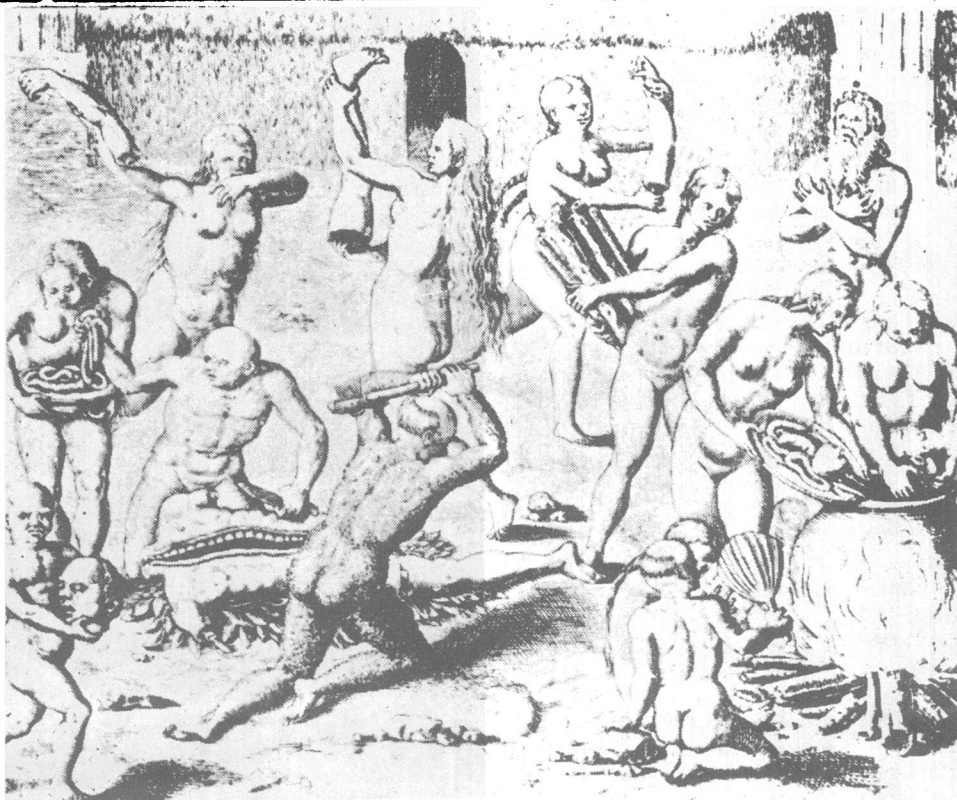
# THE CANNIBAL SIGN

*A talk given at the conference at Cumberland Lodge in February devoted to 'Taste and Taboo', organised in association with the RAI under the joint chairmanship of Professor Mary Douglas and the nutritionist Professor Arnold Spicer.*

Cannibalism is a special relation of eater and eaten, that of like consuming like. The word is more precisely used to describe man eating man, in what one might call a simple biological sense. However, I hope it will become clear that it is sociological rather than biological distinctions which are important in trying to interpret the cannibal sign. This is indicated by the pattern of restrictions upon the eating of like as they extend to the animal world. Restrictions upon the consumption of animals closely connected with the human household and working activities are well-known from many cultures. Jean Pouillon has cited the Greek prohibition against eating the flesh of the working ox. The dog, 'socialised animal' par excellence, is frequently considered a non-food. Anthropophagy is, in a sense, simply part of a wider pattern which is established by social involvement.

Myths and folklore seem to reinforce the connection between cannibalism and social definition. Our own culture contrasts the state of 'savagery' in which cannibalism exists with our own 'civilized' condition. This contrast is by no means restricted to Western culture but is repeated across the globe. In non-cannibal groups the cannibal lies beyond the bounds of acceptable society. The stranger, the distant people known only by name, the sorcerer, the witch; these are the man-eaters. Tales of 'anthropophagi, and men whose heads do grow between their shoulders' are told of the unexplored distances. Or, closer to home, the counter-society of witches disrupts the body politic and consumes the individual body. The 'devils', witches of the Ivory Coast, were said to take it in turns to provide human flesh and blood for their banquets. Cannibalism, bestiality and other improper kinds of

*A Tupinamba cannibal meal depicted by Theodorus de Bry, the 16th century German engraver and publisher (reproduced in La Religion des Tupinamba by A. Métraux, Paris, 1928).*



I. Le corps du prisonnier est dépecé (d'après de Bry).



II. Repas anthropophagique tupinamba (d'après de Bry).

eating and sexual behaviour are the marks of the Nyakusa witch. The eating of human flesh is here accompanied by other elements in the breakdown of correctly constituted society.

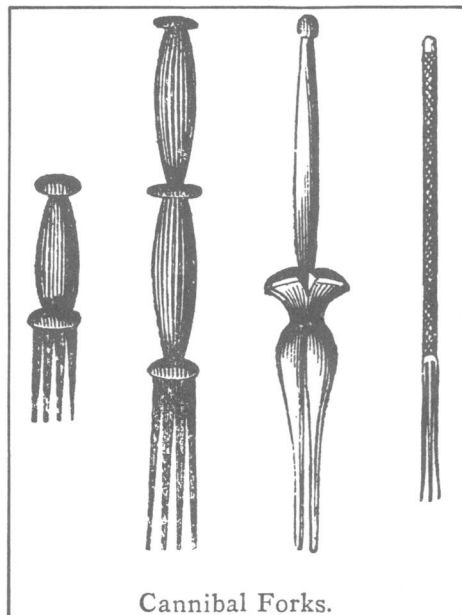
Even in societies where cannibalism is the norm one finds a contrast of what one might call 'civilized cannibalism' and 'savage cannibalism', that is to say, a cannibalism governed by the rules established in the society contrasted with one that is not (either imaginary or practised by another group). The Fataleka of the Solomon Islands practised cannibalism in connection with mortuary rites. They compared their regulated practices to the savagery of an ancient mythical people, the Dodomisco, who did not know fire, hunted men, ate their flesh raw, and were 'ignorant of the ancestors'. The folklore of the Maori of New Zealand, who (as is well known) ate captives, has its share of man-eating ogres and ogresses whose cannibalism is of a different order. Flesh will be eaten raw or without appropriate ritual. The Guayaki contrasted their consumption of their own dead, their *endo-cannibalism*, with the savagery of the neighbouring Guarani who were *exo-cannibals*, killing and eating their enemies.

It is worth noting a myth from another exo-cannibal society, the Iroquois. The Iroquois myth concerning the establishment of political and cultural order relates this to the rejection of cannibalism. The ancestral figure, Hiawatha, sees the reflection of the culture hero, Deganiwidah, in the cooking-pot and, taking it to be his own, ceases to eat human flesh. Later, in a cooking-pot full of deer flesh, their reflections are seen to be identical. Here, it is the prohibition on eating 'like', in terms of the political grouping, that establishes the cultural order.

Jean Pouillon has argued that, in the realm of ideas, cannibalism and incest are joint organising principles of the social field. Both negatively define society, the first having an internal organising role, the latter chiefly establishing the external boundary of culture. The imaginary states of primitive promiscuity and savage cannibalism give the boundary between nature and culture. G. Calame-Griaule's work on the African folktale suggests a firm identity between sexuality and eating as metaphors of social behaviour. The child of the folktale may be eaten within or outside the family. Both extreme endogamy and extreme exogamy can be seen in terms of cannibalism. Both the cannibal parent or step-parent and the cannibal stranger, the seducing ogre are recurrent characters. The family is in danger of consuming itself or of being devoured. Both cannibalism and sex are powerful metaphors of incorporation. The African folktales speak at a family level. However the metaphor works equally well in the wider political scene.

Urszula Chodowiec's description of Iroquois cannibalism suggests that being eaten or being incorporated into the tribe were, in fact, alternatives. A basic principle of Iroquois warfare was the replacement of the dead. It was the duty

of a warrior to gain captives for his father's family. This would be achieved by a raid on the killers of the man to be replaced or on the most recent attackers. Prisoners and scalps were brought back to the village and divided among the families by the council. The family to which a prisoner was given had to reach a decision whether to adopt or kill and possibly eat the captive. If the latter were decided upon, the prisoner would be tortured, an important element marking his human rather than animal status. When eventually killed he might be cooked and eaten. The only persons in the village not engaged in this activity were the members of the family to whom the prisoner was given, who, although adoption had been refused, were still considered to have a certain degree of relationship to the victim. If the prisoners were adopted they would be given mocassins and clothing and would become full members of tribe and family. Apparently, with more women adopted than men, it was not considered incorrect for a woman to replace a man.



Cannibal Forks.

*Taboo forks reserved for cannibal meals only (from Fijians and Missionary Labours Among the Cannibals by T. Williams, 1870).*

One might, then, say that the captured enemy could be either physically or socially integrated to the Iroquois. The policy of adoption and integration maintaining population-size underpinned Iroquois political and military superiority. By the seventeenth century the neighbouring Huron had been critically reduced and by the eighteenth full-blooded Iroquois are said to have been in the minority within the federation. Thus cannibalism parallels the process of massive political incorporation. Chodowiec describes cannibalism as a way of thinking and acting out relations with one's own people and with others. In the Iroquois case there are the two alternatives: eating one's enemies, the irrecoverable, alien 'other', or recovering one's own kind, the inedible. One note of warning should be sounded on this material. Other writers do refer to slave captives among the Iroquois who are not immediately or necessarily incorporated by adoption. This would move us closer to the next example.

In traditional Maori society there was no attempt to identify captives with members of one's own group. Rather they formed a slave stratum, incorporated on the lowest rung of society. Maori symbolism includes a complex contrast between personal powers of *mana* and *tapu* and cooked food. The conversion of the human body to the status of food was, then, an ultimate degradation. The most powerful insults in the language referred to cannibalism. It was an important part of the language of political dominance. To ingest an enemy was not, as has sometimes been suggested, to assume his power, but rather to assert your own in the negation of his. When one tribe or sub-tribe ate members of another, this was a claim of superiority which required to be disproven by a similar action.

Slaves, though generally well treated, were still clearly distinguished in their rights from the group to whom they belonged. A slave was still potential food and could be killed and eaten for a number of special occasions. But, if social integration was not complete and immediate, still the slave group was not static. Inter-marriage could take place with commoners of the captor group; and children born of such parentage, although of extremely low status, were free members of the community and so inedible. So here, again, we find two parallel and alternative methods of incorporation but with a heavier message of political dominance. Both the slave and the eaten are degraded. As the stigma of an eaten ancestor was not forgotten, neither was that of having been a slave.

More difficult to unravel is the cannibalism of the Tupinamba. Warfare was waged between villages of different provinces, those who did not exchange women. All prisoners of war would eventually be sacrificed and eaten. However, this might take place after the victim had been living in the village for a period of months or years. During this time, although subject to a few minor restrictions, the man would be free in his movement about the village, allowed to hunt and indeed, would usually be given a woman of the community as his wife, possibly his captor's sister or daughter. There is considerable further ambiguity in his roles in the rituals immediately following his capture. He was mocked by the women, given the status of sacrifice at the ancestral funerary site, and given a kind of recognition in the men's house, where he might boast of his deeds. When the time of the killing came, he was permitted to throw stones at his persecutors and might be given a club to hold off attack for a while. Eventually his carcass was divided up like a piece of game, but the killer changed his name to escape the dead man's ghost.

The alternatives of incorporation are, here, sequential. Indeed in this case, they are not alternatives. The marriage and the involvement in the life of the village lead to the physical consumption of the captive and of any children born of the marriage. Enemy and brother-in-law are identified by the same word; the

prisoner plays both roles in turn. This pattern seems to have been present in other South American groups including the Guarani and the Omagua. Unfortunately the lack of knowledge of detailed political relations makes it difficult to reach any definite conclusions upon the significance of these features. It would be interesting to know, beyond the vague definition of provinces, what distinguished between groups from which allied brothers-in-law were drawn and enemy groups. If affinity and enmity were not sharply contrasted in ritual, how fluid were the political distinctions?

My fourth case highlights more distinctly the political dimensions. Daniel de Coppet's work on the 'Are'are of the Solomon Islands has led him to describe a situation of real exo-cannibalism and metaphorical endo-cannibalism. He isolates two structures of exchange associated with the dead, one with those who have been killed and one with those who have died a natural death. The first exchanges are those connected with the conclusion of a state of feud, the second those associated with mortuary ceremonies. Only those enemy dead who were killed were subject to real cannibalism. There existed standard patterns for closing an exchange of murders. The major forms of conclusion were either the simple handing-over of a sum of money by the murderer's group to the group of the recently murdered man; or for the killer's group to kill one of their own members and hand the body over to the dead man's group who would later return a sum of money. The body handed over might be eaten or left to rot. It is important to note that there was an established scale of exchange. The dead might be translated into sums of money, persons killed by their own people counting for twice those killed by the enemy. The receipt of an enemy corpse, killed by their own hands, was the more prestigious manner of concluding the exchange. Real cannibalism was, then, associated with a high-stake political competition where aggressors might hope to gain rapidly in prestige, or, if all did not go well, fall equally rapidly.

But those who died a natural death, those who became ancestors, were also subject to a transformation in terms of money in the accumulations of wealth at the two great funerary ceremonies spaced out over a period of one to ten years. This was the scene for a less drastic form of political competition. There were two offices connected with the ceremonies which the individual might, at some time in his life, expect to hold. By a slow build-up of wealth, and through debts incurred to him which would be repayable when he held office, he might seek to gain prestige by bringing to his post the maximum brilliance. Although this, of course, meant that new wealth was channeled into the continuous exchange system, we also see the continual recycling of collections previously constituted for the funerary ceremonies of other individuals. Thus, the money into which one dead man was translated was

## FORTH-COMING RAI EVENTS

**Wednesday 7 May and Wednesday 14 May, 7pm** in the ICA Cinema, Nash House, the Mall, London SW1. **Members-only film shows from 'Disappearing World'**. No admission charge will be made for these two film-shows, open to Members and Fellows only. The aim is simply to screen two films each evening from among the most warmly received of the Granada 'Disappearing World' films.

7 May *Kataragama* (reviewed in *RAIN* 3, July/Aug. 1974). *The Masai* (reviewed in *RAIN* 6, Jan./Feb. 1975).

14 May *The Meo* (reviewed in *RAIN* 4, Sept./Oct. 1974). *The Mehinacu* (reviewed in *RAIN* 6, Jan./Feb. 1975).

**Friday 16 May to Sunday 18 May**, a weekend residential course at Attingham Park, the Shropshire Adult College, nr. Shrewsbury, on **Men and Women**, organised in association with the RAI.

Social anthropologists have developed distinctive and important insights into the nature of sexual roles in different societies, including our own. A new dimension has been added to this theme by the contemporary Women's Movement in the West. Among aspects of the subject that the course will include are: male/female contrasts; division of labour between men and women; power and authority; sex and marriage; dowry and

incorporated into the collection of another dead man. De Coppet refers to pan-cannibalism, or cannibalizing of the dead, each, in turn, metaphorically consuming the other. Similarly, in the competitive patterns of the recirculation of the dead converted into wealth, he sees a metaphor of endo-cannibalism. The money was the dead. It was also the medium of personal aggrandisement. In both cycles of exchange, in political competition, the 'Are'are ate the dead.

In all societies the conversion of a human being, a social being, to food is highly charged with meaning, subject to restrictions even in cannibal societies. In some areas the cooked human flesh should not be eaten with the bare hands. In Fiji there were wooden forks, among the Kukukuku of New Guinea there were wooden sticks which would be discarded after the meal. Only certain categories of person might be eaten. Among exo-cannibals only those beyond the social boundaries. Even among the Southern Fore of New Guinea and the Guayaki, both endo-cannibals, we find prohibitions relating to the eating of certain close kin. In some cases, only certain categories of person can do the eating. Among a number of Maori tribes human flesh could only be eaten by men. Elsewhere we may find the detailed sharing out of the corpse. Cannibalism, in reality, is

bridewealth; notions of female pollution. The course director will be Jonathan Benthall, Director of the RAI. The lecturers will be **Dr Jean La Fontaine** (Chairman of the Association of Social Anthropologists, Chairman of the RAI Educational Committee, Reader in Anthropology at LSE), **Dr Ursula Sharma** (Lecturer in Sociology, University of Keele) and **Dr James Woodburn** (Chairman of the RAI Film Committee, Lecturer in Anthropology at LSE). Colour films will be screened and discussed, including Robert Gardner's controversial film *Rivers of Sand* about the Hamar of Ethiopia, and two Granada Television films from the 'Disappearing World' series, *The Masai* and *The Mehinacu*.

Fee: £9 for those coming from Shropshire and other contributing authorities, £10.80 for those outside that area.

Assembly: 7.15 pm (supper), Friday 16 May. Course disperses on Sunday afternoon. Attingham Park is a large country house set in one of the National Trust's finest properties.

### ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS AND FILM, Thursday June 26

The AGM this year will be followed by an informal talk by the retiring President, Professor Edmund Leach, and screening of the ATV film *The Opium Warlords*, whose director Adrian Cowell will also join in the discussion. **Will Fellows and Members who wish to attend please fill in and send the form enclosed with this issue of RAIN, or let the office know by letter?** This meeting is strictly for Fellows and Members only (no admission charge). The meeting will be held in the Lecture Theatre, School of Oriental

firmly regulated as a social event. In the form of idea it may assume an asocial or anti-social aspect related to the definition of society.

Real cannibalism carries the metaphor of incorporation into political relations. Like consumes like, but real cannibalism is never the consumption of the 'perfect like'. Here lies the force of the cannibal sign. Domination over the 'other' or the 'nearly like' is a way of speaking about political power, control, and the assertion of identity. Incorporation is an ultimate in domination and determination.

#### Christian Clerk

The above article draws heavily on an issue of *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse* entitled 'Destins du Cannibalisme' (6, Autumn 1972), to which Pouillon, Chodowiec, Calame-Griaule and Clastres contribute. Other references: A. Métraux: *The Tupinamba, Handbook of South American Indians*, Vol.3 (1948); P. Buck: *The Coming of the Maori* (1949); E. Shortland: *Traditions and Superstitions of the New Zealanders* (1854); R. Taylor: *Te Ika a Maui* (1870); D. de Coppet: '1, 4, 8; 9, 7. La Monnaie, Présence Des Morts et Mesure du temps' (*L'Homme*, 10); 'Cycles de Meurtres et Cycles Funéraires: Esquisse de Deux Structures d'Echange' (*Echanges et Communications*, 2).