

6-2016

Cannibal Complex: The Western Fascination with Human Flesh Eating

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Cannibal Complex:
The Western Fascination with
Human Flesh Eating

By

Devin Bittner

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for
Honors in the Department of Anthropology

UNION COLLEGE
June, 2015

Abstract

BITTNER, DEVIN *Cannibal Complex: The Western Fascination with Human Flesh Eating*
Department of Anthropology, June 2015

ADVISOR: COOL, LINDA

For centuries, Western explorers, missionaries, and travelers have been bringing home tales of cannibals, which became the earliest documentation of the practice. Modern anthropology, however, has identified a serious concern with such early “documentation” in light of the rise of the ethnographic tradition: the authors of early reports did not consider the contexts in which the events they observed occurred. This thesis, in the anthropology of knowledge tradition, explores the debate over the Western idea of cannibalism by posing the question: why are we so determined to believe that evidence supporting cannibalism reflects an experiential reality, despite abundant proof of its unreliability? To consider the degree to which reports of cannibalism are accurate accounts of the observed practice requires the reexamination and reinterpretation of a number of factors and concepts that drive contemporary studies of cannibalism. To begin, the primary categories of thought that influence how cannibalism in non-Western cultures is perceived demonstrates the basis of our Western cannibal obsession, which dictates the prominent discourse on cannibalism. This discourse has played a fundamental role in impacting the sources of evidence for cannibalism available to anthropologists, and ultimately the nature of anthropological studies on the topic. Additionally, it is important to recognize the cultural exchange in which observations of cannibalism occurred, considering both the role of the Western observer and the perception of the culture observed. Together, all of these factors reveal broader conclusions about the nature of cannibalism as we define it, and suggest a possible revision to how we conceptualize the practice of consuming human flesh.

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Part I: Introduction

In my junior year of college, I spent three months studying abroad in Fiji, specifically studying anthropology. During my time there, I found myself repeatedly confronted with the topic of cannibalism as a feature of Fiji's distant past. In conversations with Fijians I was familiar with—either through my work volunteering at a preschool or through the family I was living with—I heard variations of the claim, “we used to be cannibals, but we aren't anymore, ever since the British saved us from it,” on multiple occasions. Each time it came up in conversation, the Fijian I was speaking with somehow referenced the savagery of their ancestors who practiced cannibalism, and gave praise to the British who, upon colonizing the country in 1874, eradicated the barbaric practice.

Before I arrived in the country, in fact, I was introduced to the presence cannibalism maintains in present-day Fiji. Reading aloud from a tourism guidebook she purchased for me, my mother recited, “Traditional artifacts, such as war clubs, spears and chiefly cannibal forks, are popular souvenirs” (Starnes & Luckham 2009:238). Looking back at that guidebook now, I see there are various mentions of cannibalism, presenting the practice as a tourist attraction. Under the “Sights and Activities” portion of the section about Rakiraki, a well-known area on the northernmost tip of Fiji's main island, Viti Levu, the book recommends that visitors commandeer a taxi and request that the driver “show you Udreudre's Tomb, the resting place of Fiji's most notorious cannibal.” The reason for the recommendation, however, is unclear, seeing that the book continues to say, “The tomb isn't very impressive, just a rectangular block of concrete often overgrown with weeds, but it's

just by the roadside... drivers don't mind stopping for a few minutes" (Starnes & Luckham 2009:133). So why, then, should a visitor to the area bother stopping at the Tomb for a visit? This, as well as the popularity of purchasing cannibal forks at local markets, is an example of the commoditization of cannibalism in Fiji.

Examples such as these led me to question why there is a tendency, both in Fiji and in areas across the world where cannibalism has been attributed, to draw on the images of cannibalism, knowing it is a practice that Westerners and many modern inhabitants alike tend to view as so backwards and grotesque. Human cannibalism, which, in the most basic sense can be described as the eating of human flesh, is a topic that never fails to evoke strong reaction. In its very essence, cannibalism tends to be viewed as characteristic of the antithesis of morally and socially acceptable behavior. As a cultural practice, it is directly associated with the idea of the "other," a savage, exotic, barbaric people. Directly tied into this is the further question of why we, as Westerners, are so fascinated with the idea of cannibalism and with the possibility of there being people who regularly observe such a perverse practice living among us on the same globe. These were two questions that inspired my decision to focus my thesis on cannibalism, how it has been studied, and what relation our perceptions of the practice have to how it has been studied in anthropology.

1. Early Cannibalism Studies Within Anthropology

Early reports of cannibalism were available to the Western World mainly through the accounts of explorers, missionaries, and colonial figures. As Europe began exploring the New World, many of the earliest documentations of the practice focused on South American cultures, primarily the Aztecs. Following this came accounts from the Caribbean, Africa,

Australia, Polynesia, and Papua New Guinea. Reports came in the form of travelers' tales, which consisted of "missionary testimonies, conquerors' apologetics, diplomatic and administrative reports, and the like" (Brown & Tuzin 1983:1). As resources for contemporary studies of cannibalism, however, modern anthropology has identified a serious concern with such early "documentation" in light of the rise of the ethnographic tradition. The authors of early reports "...typically did not give much account of the social and cultural contexts in which institutionalized cannibalism occurred. However factual their reports might be, cannibalism remained for them an object of curiosity," (Brown & Tuzin 1983:1) and as such, a source of considerable twentieth-century scientific skepticisms.

Anthropology developed to study not only specific practices—as objects of exotica and curiosity—but also their larger cultural meaning throughout the nineteenth-century. The 1892 edition of *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* reflected these developments in anthropological study, which remain relevant today. The book was published as a guide for travellers, specifically those who were not trained as anthropologists, to promote accurate observation that could be useful for anthropological studies. The need for such a guide grew partly out of the concern about the "Rapid extermination of savages at the present time, and the rapidity with which they are being reduced to the standard of European manners, [which] renders it of urgent importance" (Garson & Read 1892:vi) to collect accurate observations as soon as possible. Each chapter addressed a specific subject for cultural observation, and listed a series of questions "...each of which is the result of special study of the subject treated, [and] may be a means of enabling the traveller to collect information without prejudice arising from his individual bias" (Garson & Read 1892:vi). Chapter XXVI on

Cannibalism provides a list of nineteen questions, which serve as a basic introduction to modern cannibal studies:

1. Does the cannibal prevail?
2. If it no longer prevails, are there any traditions as to its once having been known?
3. Is it frequent or exceptional?
4. Are there any reasons assigned for it?
5. Is it the result of a craving for animal food, or to show victory over a deceased for, or for the purpose of acquiring part of the valor of the person eaten?
6. Are the victims generally men, women, or children?
7. Are they enemies slain in war, captives taken in war or by deceit, or slaves, or other persons selected for the purpose?
8. Are any special ceremonies observed in cannibal feasts?
9. What parts of the body are eaten, or are any parts considered delicacies?
10. What is done with the bones?
11. Are any of them used for implements or ornaments?
12. Is any religious idea connected with it? And are the victims considered sacrifices to the gods?
13. Has the cooked human flesh any name of its own, euphemistic or otherwise?
14. Is it prepared in the usual cooking-places, or are there special cooking-places set apart or constructed for the purpose?
15. Are any special vessels or implements used for cannibal feasts (Fiji)?
16. Is the use of human food confined to any class or sex?
17. Does it form part of the regular food of the people?
18. Do the natives seem ashamed to confess their cannibalism?
19. Is an individual considered unclean after joining in a cannibal feast? (*i.e.*, is there a distinction between a dead body in the ordinary sense and one intended to be eaten?)

[Garson & Read 1892:129]

The list of nineteen questions compiled in *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* (1892) reviews some of the more basic aspects of consumption, but also “urges inquiry into the general circumstances of cannibalism, the ritual or other justifications given for it, the statuses of those involved in the feast, and other matters pertaining to the symbolism of the act” (Brown & Tuzin 1983:2). This demonstrates the beginnings of ethnology – the cross-cultural study of cultures that allows for the development of more general theories.

2. Twentieth-Century Scholarship

Anthropology experienced somewhat of a loss of interest in the study of cannibalism through the nineteenth-century, during the time when the rise of ethnology in anthropological studies occurred. A large factor that contributed to this declining interest was the increasing difficulty of obtaining information, which arose alongside colonial intervention. Anthropologists who accompanied colonial forces were likely forbidden to write about cannibalism, since the success of colonial efforts was measured by the ability to break such barbaric habits as cannibalism. Moreover, colonial officers reacted to any reports of cannibalism by prohibiting the practice and subduing the beliefs associated with it, thus eliminating opportunities to study cannibalism as it occurred.

More recent twentieth-century scholarship, however, has taken a renewed interest in cannibalism. This resurgence stems “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” (Brown & Tuzin 1983:2-3). Subsequent twentieth-century scholarship of cannibalism has followed a line of evolution that directly parallels the evolution of general anthropological and human science theories. Six theoretical approaches most commonly appear throughout the study of cannibalism and have the most influence on how cannibalism is viewed today by the discipline: functional approach, psychological analysis, social evolutionary studies, cultural materialist arguments, symbolic interpretations, and historic/critical writings.

APPROACHES

The *functional* approach interprets the purpose of cannibalism in a society as an instrument to enhance group identity and solidarity. Malinowski’s psychological functional

analyses of the 1930s, which looks at what keeps societies stable and how social and cultural institutions serve basic human biological and psychological needs, can be seen as a beginning point for modern functionalist accounts of the study of cannibalism. Additionally, structural functionalism (as advocated by Radcliffe-Brown) provides a framework through which cannibalism can be seen to act as a critical distinction between in-group and out-group, depending on whether “only others,” or “only ourselves,” are consumed. Through this, social actions and their larger meanings conceptualize “cannibal practice as part of the broader cultural logic of life, death, and reproduction” (Sanday 1986:3). Into the late 1950s, functionalism remained influential in British anthropology, as it “...led scholars to examine cannibalism in Highland New Guinea in the context of relationships among social structure, sorcery, politics, and warfare” (Lindenbaum 2004:480).

The *psychological analysis* approach considers what psychological factors motivate cannibalism. Scholars (Askenasy 1944; Davies 1981; Freud 1913, 1950; Helmuth 1973; Levi-Strauss 1966; Sagan 1974; Tannahill 1975) who follow this approach “naturally heed the recurrence of cannibal fantasies in dreams, folktales, and clinics, and conclude that the institutionalized eating of human flesh must be the expression of physically primitive, oral-sadistic impulses” (Brown & Tuzin 1983:3).

In the 1970s, cannibalism began to be considered through *evolutionary studies* as a trait reflecting a society’s stage in moral and social development (Hanson 1996; Helmuth 1973; Tannahill 1975). This approach, which owes its origins to nineteenth-century unilineal cultural evolution, uses the concept of a distinct continuum for the progression of humanity, divided into a series of stages. In the context of this theory, cannibalism may be seen as a characteristic of cultures on the earlier, less evolved end of the spectrum.

The *cultural materialist* explanation follows the basic claim that the central engines of culture are economics and the environment, through which cannibalism is seen as an economic nutritional phenomenon (Dornstreich & Morren 1974; Farb & Amelagos 1980; Harris 1977; Harner 1977). This approach "...presents a utilitarian, adaptive model—people adapt to hunger or protein deficiency by eating one another" (Sanday 1986:3). The materialist explanation led to suggestions such as those pursued by Harris (1977), which, for example, attributed the fifteenth-century Aztec ritual killing and cannibalism of war captives to times of famine and scarcity of animal protein in Mexico, essentially explaining Aztec human sacrifice by hunger and protein deficiency.

The pursuits of *symbolic interpretations* for cannibalism "...provide a clue to the theoretical shift taking place during the 1970s and 1980s towards matters of cultural belief, cosmology, and ritual" (Lindenbaum 2004:481). This approach was concerned with the "beliefs associated with cannibalism and the symbolic and ritual means through which these beliefs are expressed" (Pickering 1999:2). Opposing Harris' (1977) claims, Sahlins (1978) saw cannibalism as a ritual deeply rooted in symbolism. Critiquing Harris' utilitarian view, in which economic function and material concerns govern the entire social superstructure, Sahlins claimed that Harris ignored the cultural context surrounding the system of Aztec sacrifice. Following Sahlins' path, during the 1990s, anthropologists studied cannibalism as it appeared differently in various locations, focusing on what it meant for the individuals who practiced it rather than on larger, universal theories (Gillison 1983; Lindenbaum 1983; Kilgour 1990; MacCormack 1983; Poole 1983; Sahlins 1983; Sanday 1988; Tuzin 1983). Thus, attention was "turned instead to the mirrored reflections of both fact and fantasy to be found in diverse behaviors and beliefs" (Lindenbaum 2004:481).

Into the twenty-first century, as anthropology continues to examine cannibalism, the approach of *historic/critical writings* stresses the necessity of examining sources before using them to support credible analyses (Arens 1979; Evans-Pritchard 1960). Among the first five approaches is a shared characteristic that “the source data are rarely subject to critical analysis prior to analyses” (Pickering 1999:53). Over time, “Anthropologists have come to appreciate the dangers of framing cultural difference in historical terms, ignoring the extent to which various social and cultural forms and practices encountered in the present are themselves the products of modern social, political, and cultural processes” (Lindenbaum 2004:482). This approach is commonly credited to William Arens, whose 1979 publication, *The Man-Eating Myth*, proved pivotal in the study of cannibalism.

TYOLOGIES

As a prerequisite for any study, it is necessary to establish a definition for the topic at hand: so, what is cannibalism? For the purpose of this study, cannibalism is defined most generally as the consumption of human flesh. Part of what makes cannibalism such a widely discussed topic is the diversity of practices and situations that fit this definition, however, which calls for us to make further refinements. On the most basic level, the different types of cannibalism vary according to motive and circumstance.

Survival cannibalism and *cannibalism as psychopathology* are the two most common forms of anthropophagy within contemporary popular discussions. *Survival cannibalism* is the consumption of humans under circumstances of starvation, during which people who would be otherwise against the idea are driven to it in order to survive. One of the most famous cases of survival cannibalism, often the first example of cannibalism that comes to mind for Americans today, is the case of the Donner Party in 1846. *Cannibalism as*

psychopathology, “aberrant behavior considered to be an indicator of severe personality disorder or psychosis” (Lindenbaum 2004:477) has reached renewed popularity in recent years. Lindenbaum provides the following description as an example of this form of cannibalism:

Recent cases include a Japanese student at the Sorbonne who in 1981 murdered and ate his Dutch girlfriend. Considered mentally incompetent to stand trial in France, Mr. Sagawa returned to Japan where he spent a year in hospital. His serialized novel of the crime and his role as a talk show commentator have resulted in his celebrity status as a “bunkajin,” a person of culture with expertise in a specific area (South China Morning Post 2000). [Lindenbaum 2004:477]

Although these forms of cannibalism are well known through popular interest, they are forms of cannibalism that are not culturally sanctioned, and only arise as a deviation from culturally regulated norms. For this reason, they are not forms that prove relevant for the current study. *Endocannibalism* and *exocannibalism* are the two categories that have come to describe the diversity of cannibal practices that exist as culturally sanctioned institutions. *Endocannibalism* is the consumption of a member of one’s “group,” (typically kinship or ancestry group). This form of cannibalism usually occurs in the form of funerary or mortuary practices, in which “human flesh is the physical channel for communicating social value and procreative fertility from one generation to the next... recycles and regenerates social forces that are believed to be physically constituted in bodily substances or bones” (Sanday 1986:7). *Exocannibalism* is consumption of someone from an outside group, such as enemies of war. This form is defined as an act of aggression, and “frequently includes some form of perimortem mutilation and use of skull trophies (headhunting)” (Goldman 1999:14). It is these two forms of cannibalism that our study will refer to.

3. Anthropological Studies

Having established a general line of evolution for how cannibalism has been considered throughout the history of anthropological theory, I want to take a brief moment to acknowledge the challenges and goals of studying cannibalism in anthropology today. The study of cannibalism is a topic that has created considerable impacts in the discipline of anthropology: “it is a legacy that has both sensitized the discipline to the fact that its science is never ideologically neutral—images of ‘others’ invariably service political agendas—and sharpened understanding of why it is that people continue to be ‘scandalized, titillated and spellbound’ by the subject of cannibalism” (Osborne 1997:28 quoted in Goldman 1999:2). For anthropologists, cannibalism has proven to be “a complex subject that has often provoked fierce debate. Why have some cultures practiced something that others see as one of the most fundamental taboos in human society?” (Hoffman 2014:34). Goldman (1999) points out how few other topics have the power to command such a high level of media attention, which has resulted in the intellectual history of anthropology being burdened by what it has had to say about cannibalism. This claim speaks to the general weight the topic of cannibalism has in anthropological studies, and in general human interest.

In pursuing research on the topic of cannibalism within anthropology, it is evident that there is a notable rarity of cannibalism as a central theme of study among anthropologists, as well as an equally notable absence of great theories attempting to definitively describe the practice, explaining when, why, and how it occurs. Goldman (1999) proposes that these two gaps in the analysis are less indicative of the disappearance of cannibalism as a common practice, and more of a reluctance to provide information that could be taken to support common stereotypes associated with the practice. He claims that

any discussion of the practice “risks euphemization and disorientation and is encumbered by judgmental viewpoints” (Goldman 1999:2). This reluctance is echoed by Gardner (1999), who declined to provide further examples of specific cannibalistic events practiced by the Mianmin of New Guinea in order to avoid the possibility of allowing his readers to form the impression that the Mianmin are a cruel people, stating, “like many anthropologists, though, I have reservations about providing information that might rationalize such inferences” (Gardner 1999:35). The lack of theories attempting to describe cannibalism can be traced to a similar reluctance. In studying and writing about cannibalism, the question arises of whether “they are not replicating the very structures and representations they earnestly seek to critique” (Goldman 1999:5). One of the many criticisms against Arens that resulted from the publication of *The Man-Eating Myth* was an accusation that Arens was “upholding the stereotype of ‘savage society’ by having examined the topic of cannibalism in the first place” (Arens 1998:44). In essence, a large challenge of studying cannibalism within anthropology is the possibility for analysis to be taken out of context or read without the appropriate relativism, leading to further perpetuation of negative and unsupported stereotypes of the practice.

The nature of anthropological research and writing, however, has the potential to combat this challenge and present a more informed image of cannibalism to general readers. Gardner (1999) spends a great deal of time in his chapter discussing “ethically charged reactions,” which are reactions that are central to ethical practices. Anthropology has found a great deal of success in “contextualizing and re-describing practices that do or might evoke negative reactive attitudes without euphemizing them” (Gardner 1999:40). This is the approach that many scholars who have focused on cannibalism have taken. They look to

present their readers with a broader cultural context in which the practice exists, and show its meaning as embedded in the culture it exists within, demonstrating its social function. While in certain cases, it is not always possible to fully counter the negative reaction evoked by practices such as cannibalism by providing context, it is worth acknowledging that the majority of anthropological focus on the topic of cannibalism has aimed to disarm popular stereotypes using this method of contextualization.

EMBEDDEDNESS

One approach that is common in the anthropological treatment of cannibalism is to demonstrate the extent to which the practice is embedded in the greater societal and cultural structure, thus establishing its social function. This approach constitutes what Sahlins suggests as the “cultural sense of cannibalism,” which “refers to its place in the total cultural scheme, its relationship to other categories or concepts” (Sanday 1986:153). Many anthropologists employ this tactic in an attempt to extend the audience’s understanding of cannibalism beyond the simple definition of consuming human flesh, revealing its role as an institution, interconnected with elements of society that we consider to be more familiar, including social, cultural, and religious realities.

Reverend Gerard Zegwaard’s 1959 article, *Headhunting Practices of the Asmat of Netherlands New Guinea*, is an excellent example for how this approach manifests in application. Zegwaard was a Roman Catholic missionary, stationed by the Dutch in the Asmat region of Netherlands New Guinea, from 1952-1956, among a people who “have won a reputation for their headhunting practices” (Zegwaard 1959:1020). In the introduction to his article, he states, “it is worth while to analyze the ideologies from which this practice originated. For, even when the Asmat people will no longer hunt heads, they will have these

ideologies” (Zegwaard 1959:1020). Here, he foreshadows how important his source is for detailing the absolute embeddedness of the practice in all aspects of Asmat society. He explains that the practice does not exist as an isolated custom, but that it arose from ideologies that shape all of Asmat culture, and will continue to exist even when the practice no longer does.

Sahlins follows a similar argument in his analysis of Aztec sacrifice and cannibalism. He notes, “Aztec cannibalism can only be understood within the broader system of Aztec sacrifice for by itself cannibalism did not exist for the Aztecs” (Sanday 1986:18). To support this claim, he explains that human flesh was not considered to be ordinary meat, and was not consumed in an ordinary meal. Rather, cannibalism was only practiced on specific occasions according to specific guidelines, as part of a sacrament bringing humans into communion with gods. In a separate analysis, Sahlins concluded that “Fijian cannibalism was not simply anthropophagy... but a complex phenomenon whose myriad attributes were acquired by its relations to a great variety of such ‘elements of society’—material, political, linguistic, ritual, supernatural” (Sahlins 2003:4). By demonstrating the extent to which the practice is embedded in the cultures within which it exists, anthropologists appeal to their audiences by giving the practice practical meaning within the given context. This works to remove the practice of cannibalism from the realm of savage, unrestrained and incomprehensible violence, and instead provide a glimpse into a world in which the practice has real purpose.

One way in which the embeddedness approach is often applied is through conceptions of reproduction, both physical and social. The role that cannibalism plays in physical reproduction appears as a key feature in many analyses of cannibal cultures. From one examination of the Asmat in New Guinea, “The violence [of cannibalism] was the very

fabric of their lives—it made them whole, constituted them, gave them identity and literally nourished them, helping the semen flow...” (Hoffman 2014:71). As a tool for social reproduction, anthropologists present cannibalism as a system to reproduce social structures. Sahlins pursued this argument, stating that the practice of sacrifice in Aztec society was “...so implicated in the particulars of social relations, politics, and economics, that without sacrifice, the web of human social interactions would come apart” (Sanday 1986:19). Following this logic, Aztec culture was essentially produced by sacrifice. Similarly, Sanday (1986:21) argued that the practice of cannibalism and the active systems of social reproduction were inseparable, together initially producing and thereafter maintaining the Fijian chiefdom. Thus, both Sahlins and Sanday presented an analysis of cannibalism as embedded in a culture out of sociocultural necessity.

MYTH

Another approach that appears often in anthropological treatments of cannibalism is to describe the most fundamental myths of the culture in question, demonstrating the mythical origins of cannibalism within a culture. Through this approach, anthropologists attempt to show the audience how myths exist to explain and justify cannibalism for those who practice it. Most often, this displays “mythic and ritual material showing that the practice of cannibalism does not stand alone... in life and thought but articulates many profound aspects of their take on the world” (Gardner 1999:36). Since there is ample evidence and analysis concerning the Asmat creation myth and its relationship to cannibalism, it is this material that this section will discuss.¹

¹ Additionally, the reader should know that the discussion of myth will be addressed in more depth later (Part IV, Ch.2). Specifically, there will be a consideration of myth believed in a metaphorical sense rather than a literal sense.

According to the Asmat creation myth, the practices of headhunting and cannibalism began with two of the most ancient ancestors, Desoipitsj and Biwiripitsj, who were brothers. In essence, it was these brothers who taught the Asmat how to headhunt, and how to butcher a human body in the way to best serve their needs. Specifically, it describes the appropriate way to use the meat and the bones—specifically the skull—to continue the flow of life into the world. For the Asmat, headhunting and cannibalism are directly tied to the process of creating men from boys, and thus nurturing and enabling the process of physical reproduction (Zegwaard 1959:1021-6). Hoffman’s analysis of myth for Asmat cannibalism describes the effect of this anthropological approach well:

Humans create myth and story to bring meaning to their lives, to explain their lives, and over thousands of years, the Asmat created a story and ritual that transcended basic nutrition or eating and provided both genesis and justification for their actions. By the 1950s, Asmat cannibalism was seen as a by-product of headhunting and its sacred rituals, rather than its primary purpose [Hoffman 2014:35].

Thus, many anthropologists focus on myth both for its value as an emic explanation for the practice, and for its effectiveness in contextualizing cannibalism, as those who practice it understand it.

As an explanation for cannibalism for those who practice it within a culture, the myth directs its followers to a belief that they practice cannibalism because their ancestors established the precedent. After describing the entire Asmat creation myth to Zegwaard, his informant, Warsékomen, stated, “if Desoipitsj had not pressed the headhunting and butchering on his brother Biwiripitsj, we the people of the Asmat would never have been [cannibals]” (Zegwaard 1959:1026). This directly displays how, from the internal perspective, the creation myth is the reason they practice cannibalism. Anthropologists extend this basic, emic understanding to reveal the culture’s larger understanding of the

sources of life and death. Referring back to Sahlins' "cultural sense of cannibalism," the relationship between cannibalism and other cultural categories "are paradigmatically expressed in a mythically based model of and for reality entitled 'How the Fijians First Became Cannibals.' This myth, which is ostensibly about the origin of cannibalism, is... about the origin of culture" (Sanday 1986:153). The myths then act as a guide for how humans can deal with the sources of life and death by controlling them, and even dominating them, through prescribed practices, including cannibalism. As for how it reveals the understanding of cannibalism for those who practice it, the myth acts as a set of guidelines. For example, the way in which a body is cut and prepared before consumption follows the precise set of instructions outlined by the ancestors in the myth.

4. Arens' Effect

The study of cannibalism experienced, as Goldman (1999) stated, "...a defining moment... when William Arens... cast a shadow of skepticism over the entire corpus of literary accounts that claimed that society *x* or *y* indulged in this practice" (Goldman 1999:13). In essence, by publishing *The Man-Eating Myth* in 1979, Arens redirected attention within the study of cannibalism by criticizing the reliability of evidence supporting the practice. He rejected the idea that we can claim that cannibalism was ever a culturally institutionalized practice based on common reports, which are not rooted in dependable, eyewitness evidence. Arens' argument had a great impact on the study of cannibalism in anthropology when it was published, and continues to influence the discussion today. In fact, although Arens was widely criticized for his book, it also influences all of anthropology, having raised concerns about what it means to have "credible" data. The

arguments produced by Arens were not only crucial to the general anthropological study of cannibalism, but also to this current study. Many of the points that support Arens' claims are fundamental concepts that drive the focus of this thesis, and for this reason, it is important to look more carefully into his arguments and their applications before continuing to consider how anthropology has studied cannibalism.

ORIGINAL ARGUMENT

The first, and possibly most important effect of Arens' argument was how widely it was misunderstood. Many readers believed that in *The Man-Eating Myth*, Arens was essentially attempting to claim that cannibalism never existed. A common misconception was that "Arens finds the thought so horrific that he cannot even entertain seriously the possibility that there has ever been a society in which cannibalism was routinely practiced" (Gardner 1999:28). In reality, however, a closer reading of Arens' argument reveals that this was not his opinion: "I have stated my reservations on the matter, but nonetheless have consciously avoided suggesting that customary cannibalism in some form does not or never has existed" (Arens 1979:180). Further, it becomes clear that his interest was in addressing a different question entirely. In his own words, "The question of whether or not people eat each other is taken as interesting but moot. But if the idea that they do is commonly accepted without adequate documentation, then the reason for this state of affairs is an even more intriguing problem" (Arens 1979:9). In other words, Arens was primarily interested in the fact that people are willing to accept that cannibalism is practiced without sufficient evidence supporting the claim.

With this in mind, the intricacies of his argument also deserve a second look. Arens outlined two fundamental lines of inquiry that drove his project: "First, to assess critically

the instances of documentation for cannibalism, and second, by examining this material and the theoretical explanations offered, to arrive at some broader understanding of the nature and function of anthropology over the past century” (Arens 1979:9). Thus, Arens was less concerned with the evidence for cannibalism per se as he was with the concept of cannibalism within anthropology and the relationship between the practice and the discipline, posing the question of why anthropologists appear to be so willing to believe that cannibalism existed without the kinds of documentation that the discipline normally requires. On this topic, Arens concluded, “that the ever-present cannibals on the horizon of the Western world are the result of intellectual conjuring—including the anthropological variety” (Arens 1998:40).

RETHINKING ANTHROPOPHAGY

In a later publication, an essay titled “Rethinking Anthropophagy” (1998), Arens responded to reactions evoked by his previous publication in an attempt to “reclaim [his] original argument from its interpreters” (Arens 1998:40). Here, he states his original argument in a clearer, more direct manner. True to his 1979 publication, he maintains his belief in the “mythological nature of these creatures” (Arens 1998:40) referring to the role of intellectual conjuring in creating the idea of the cannibal “other.” Overall, he summarizes his point:

The intent was to suggest that even if cannibalism had existed or still did exist, the pervasive anthropological conclusion that it was rampant – and the imagery associated with such a conclusion – was based on something less than a rational evidential process. After all, if it exists, cannibalism should be observable, and ethnography – the presumed hallmark of anthropology – involves the description of a custom prior to interpretation. The anthropological fixation has been on the latter with boundless displays of interpretive fancy. [Arens 1998:42]

While he recognizes that accusing others of cannibalism is not a uniquely Western habit, he suggests that “this feature of our thought does point to an unsettling contradiction between avowals of scholarly objectivity and a prefigured outcome, particularly within the discipline of anthropology, which has laid claim to a demythologizing project” (Arens 1998:41). The significance of his claim that there is insufficient evidence to justify labeling groups as cannibals is that in giving them this label, we have exoticized them.

ARENS' POINTS FOR CONSIDERATION

The nature of Arens' argument points out the contradictions in Western studies of non-Western man-eating practices. Hulme (1998) summarized the essence of this contradiction in his introduction of Arens' ideas:

For Arens the association between cannibalism and Western imperialism is impossible to ignore: cannibalism was supposedly the trait that characterized those parts of the world into which the torch of civilization had not yet shone. That such areas of darkness were by definition unobserved by the torch-bearers did not dent their confident description of the practices that flourished there. Yet to shine the torch of civilization into these dark spots immediately caused the practice to wither. [Hulme 1998:7-8]

The way the West understood cannibal practices attributed it to certain societies, but the criteria that constitute the attribution is based in a lack of European experience with the society in question.

While this thesis is widely influenced by Arens' legacy, there are specific points of his argument that will be examined further. Mainly, we will reflect on the concept of cannibalism within anthropology and the relationship between the practice and the discipline. First, we will consider the interest Westerners have with the prospect of cannibals that makes them willing to accept that cannibalism is practiced without sufficient evidence supporting the claim. Next, we will focus on the fact that scholars appear to be willing to

accept evidence that would not typically be considered sufficient. Then, we will discuss how the belief in a prefigured outcome contradicts the aims of objectivity.

5. Goals of this Thesis

Western society maintains a resilient abhorrence of cannibalism, as the consumption of human flesh undeniably holds a place as one of our most gruesome taboos. Is it not entirely possible that such strong opinions on a topic may have considerable influence on how it has been studied? Having identified a definite bias in the general Western perceptions, it would be negligent to not afford the topic a reexamination. The aim of this thesis, most generally, is to consider how cannibalism has been studied within anthropology. This will require more than an overview of approaches to the topic through history, however. Rather, the focus is to consider how popular Western perceptions, opinions, and discourses on cannibalism have influenced the way in which scholars approach the topic, as well as the eventual conclusions their studies produce. To clarify, I want to address what this thesis is *not*. This thesis is not a study of whether or not cannibalism occurs, or occurred, in any culture. I neither believe, nor do I wish to assert, that cannibalism has never existed as an isolated or even institutionalized practice. This thesis does not aim to address this question.

Part II considers the primary categories of thought that influenced how cannibalism was viewed during the age of exploration, when reports of cannibalism in non-Western cultures were brought back to the West, and scholars began to discuss the topic. The categories describe prominent viewpoints that, together, worked to maintain and elevate a Western obsession with cannibalism, which I refer to as a Cannibal Complex. With an

understanding of these categories of thought, we will be better prepared to contemplate why Westerners have such an obsession with the idea of man-eating barbarians living on the periphery of Western civilization. It is this Cannibal Complex that makes Westerners so willing to accept sources of evidence for cannibalism without sufficient proof. Part III focuses on how the Cannibal Complex may have affected sources of evidence for cannibalism. This section most directly discusses the elements of Arens' arguments that we identified as relevant for this study. Upon reevaluation, it becomes apparent that many of the sources of evidence for institutionalized cannibalism are subject to the same categories of influence that inform Western perceptions. We will therefore review the common sources of evidence used in anthropological studies and see how they hold up to a more contextual critique. Part IV considers how the Cannibal Complex may have affected Western studies of cannibalism, and the possibility of how slanted our Western *representation* of cannibalism might be. This will involve reinterpretation of the aspects of studies that are most subject to influences of Western interpretation. Part V calls to attention the context created when two cultures come into contact, and the cultural exchange in which observations of cannibalism occurred. This involves considering both the role of the Western observer and the perception of the culture observed. To do this, we will examine the influence yielded by the observer within the context of observation, the native perspective of contact with Westerners, and how contact affected native practices of cannibalism.

6. Anthropology of Knowledge

This thesis is modeled in the tradition of the anthropology of knowledge. The concept of an anthropology of knowledge is pursued in different ways by different

anthropologists. The approach taken by Sally Slocum in her 1971 article, “Woman the Gatherer: Male Bias in Anthropology” closely matches the approach this thesis will follow. Introducing her article, Slocum establishes the base on which her study is built by explaining that while some anthropologists have looked at how knowledge is experienced through different cultures, few have looked at anthropological knowledge itself. Slocum identifies two parts that should appear in an anthropology of knowledge, which will be defining elements for this thesis: a consideration of what we “know,” and the nature of anthropological questions.

First:

...How we “know” anything—what is accepted as “proof,” what is reality, what are the grounds for rationality (Garfinkel, 1960), what modes are used in gathering knowledge, what are the effects of differences in culture and world view on what we “know.” [Slocum 1971:399]

The importance of this line of questioning should be clear from the discussion of Arens and how his work will be relevant for our current considerations. We will be consistently questioning sources of evidence, methods of evidence collection, and their validity as proof. Beyond the evidence itself, we will be considering the concept of knowledge and how the status of “truth” determines the form and path of our discussions.

Second:

...A close examination of the questions asked in anthropology, for questions always determine and limit answers... We are human beings studying other human beings, and we cannot leave ourselves out of the equation. We choose to ask certain questions, *and not others*... our questions are shaped by the particulars of our historical situation, and by unconscious cultural assumptions. [Slocum 1971:399]

Slocum pursued this line of thinking in order to expose the fundamental prejudices against women in anthropological studies that have resulted from the majority of white Western males in the field dictating which questions are relevant. For our purposes, we will pursue

this line of thinking in an attempt to uncover what popular perspectives and settings may have motivated the nature of anthropological questions.

This thesis will not, however, pursue the tradition of an anthropology of knowledge as applied to the study of cannibalism in order to make larger conclusions about the field of anthropology in general. Rather, we will use the framework established by the anthropology of knowledge, which encourages reflexive thinking and reconsideration of what we “know,” to reconsider the concept of cannibalism within Western anthropology.

CASE STUDY: PICKERING

Pickering (1999) began his critique of the claim that Aboriginal societies engaged in institutionalized cannibalism by describing his interests in the subject. His description of how his original interest transformed into a more involved intellectual study demonstrates the anthropology of knowledge applied to considerations of cannibalism. He explains:

My interests in the question of Aboriginal cannibalism developed when I was a young and naïve anthropology postgraduate. I shared the popular belief that it had indeed been a common practice in the past; after all, all the past greats of Australian anthropology said so. I intended to choose a nice example, one full of detail, and analyze it for its ritual, symbolic, or even economic content... It was not long before I realized I could not find one. I was asked to believe in Aboriginal cannibalism on faith rather than on argument. This led me to start questioning whether the phenomenon really existed. When I approached my supervisor with this observation, I was advised... not to worry about assessing the evidence but rather, to look at why people did it as a prelude to looking at the symbolism of cannibalism. Even before starting my research in earnest it was, therefore, clear that prominent anthropologists were already convinced of the reality of institutionalized Aboriginal cannibalism. As a hard-core empiricist I was of the opinion that, in any study, it is essential that the quality of the evidence be considered. Any theoretical developments based on invalid evidence are useless. [Pickering 1999:52]

This description is of particular importance because it illustrates the framework of the anthropology of knowledge in action. A defining theme among some of the main sources that support this thesis is described here. Upon beginning to study the topic of

institutionalized cannibalism, they came to realize that the proof they were searching for was either inadequate or absent. It is the line of inquiry that arose after this realization that this thesis focuses on.

REFLEXIVE

The notion of cannibalism is particularly useful for performing an anthropology of knowledge because it is an especially rich topic for self-reflection. The reflexive nature of the topic is revealed through the writing of Michel de Montaigne, one of the most prominent writers of the French Renaissance, best known for writing the *Essais*. In a time defined by exploration and travel, he was highly influenced by tales from travelers returning to Europe of strange, yet fascinating people inhabiting far-away lands. In his work, Montaigne “embarks on a trenchant critique of human knowledge,” (Montaigne 1943:xxiii) where, by studying himself, he, by extension, performs a study of mankind. A critical component of his critique of human knowledge is his claim that our knowledge is imperfect because it is based in our senses and perception: “There is nothing about which men really agree... and no wonder; for man’s reason, the instrument of his knowledge, is defective... Inevitably we distort whatever we perceive” (Montaigne 1943:xxiii). He believes we can only perform useful comparison with an understanding of the relevant context, warning “we should beware of clinging to common opinions, and judge things by reason’s way, not by popular say” (Montaigne 1943:73). Additionally, he believes that we can effectively learn about ourselves through comparison with other cultures if we are willing to see what this comparison reveals about the nature of mankind.

Most relevant to the current discussion is Montaigne’s *essai*, “Of Cannibals,” which is significant for its discussion of how we should judge other cultures, and ourselves. In the

essay, Montaigne discusses the cannibal practices of a Brazilian tribe. With a basic understanding of Montaigne's approach, it is not hard to see why writers, such as Goldman, have claimed that this work "has long been regarded within anthropology as a *locus classicus* of how in the representation of otherness, and most particularly the 'exotic,' we need to decenter ourselves from our own culturally shaped morality" (1999:1). Montaigne challenges the common demeaning attitude towards such exotic outsiders, and thus towards the practice of cannibalism, not by arguing in favor of the practice, but by insisting we reflect back on our own practices. He does not attempt to persuade his reader to adopt the practice, but to outline the stark contrast the Brazilian culture provides to European cultures in order to highlight the flaws present in his own society. He states, "I am not sorry that we notice the barbarous horror of such acts, but I am heartily sorry that, judging their faults rightly, we should be so blind to our own" (Montaigne 1943:85). Thus, he makes the radical claim that although the Brazilians undeniably practice a barbaric custom, they cannot be judged to be as barbaric as his fellow sixteenth-century Europeans. Supporting his claim, he continues:

I think there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead, in tearing by tortures and the rack a body still full of feeling, in roasting him bit by bit, having him bitten and mangled by dogs and swine (as we have not only read but seen within fresh memory, not among ancient enemies, but among neighbors and fellow citizens, and what is worse, on the pretext of piety and religion) than in roasting and eating him after he is dead. [Montaigne 1943:85]

In this statement, Montaigne references forms of punishment and torture used in Europe during the time, not simply equating them to the Brazilian cannibalism, but asserting that they deserve an even higher categorization of barbarity. He concludes, "we may very well call these people barbarians in respect to the rules of reason, but not in respect to ourselves, who surpass them in every kind of barbarity" (Montaigne 1943:85-6). In light of these ideas,

Goldman explained that Montaigne “chose cannibalism as a vehicle for reflexive thought not only to subvert conventional wisdoms both within and about his own culture, but as a passageway to self-enlightenment” (Goldman 1999:1-2). Thus, Montaigne established a legacy, which is vital in studying practices that constitute otherness, of attempting to look outside of our culturally determined values and ideas.

Part II: Development of Western Views

Western society harbors a strict revulsion for the consumption of human flesh; cannibalism is one of our greatest taboos. That members of Western societies view cannibalism as inherently wrong is an element of our tacit knowledge: most of us never think twice about it, never mind attempt to understand it. Cannibalism is considered to be a form of consumption that violates all accepted and commonly imposed boundaries. For these reasons, it can be said that the West suffers from a sort of “Cannibal Phobia.” At the same time, however, the West also suffers from an obsession with the idea of cannibalism; with the idea that there are people *out there* who regularly engage in such a horrific and unthinkable act.

As a matter so often discussed as the basic starting point for ideas of morality and acceptable human behavior, the topic of cannibalism is highly dependent on views held by those discussing it. Western views of cannibalism are primarily the product of a combination of different influences and ways of making sense of the world, such as “othering,” the notion of evolutionary progress, and colonialism. It is clear that each of these categories establishes a framework through which “attributions of anthropophagy have invariably perpetuated agendas that proclaim that different is dangerous” (Goldman 1999:4). Moreover, it will be valuable for us to identify how these influences have changed and developed over time in relation to transforming Western attitudes towards the “exotic.”

1. Barbarism and “Othering”

During the Age of Exploration, at the time of initial Western contact with many of the “exotic” cultures encountered during trade, missionary work, and military colonial expeditions, the discovered cultures and their practices embodied the exact reversal of the European world, reflecting “a mirror image of every taboo of the West” (Hoffman 2014:38). Consistent with Freud’s claim that “...culture began with prohibition of ancient desires—incest, cannibalism, and the lust for killing” (Sanday 1986:161), cannibalism was seen in direct opposition to the notion of culture or civilization. In essence, Europeans viewed the presence of cannibalism to have “...crossed a line uncommon in human history, even in traditional hunting-and-gathering cultures. The most horrific, most monstrous thing we could think of had been central to their everyday life” (Hoffman 2014:125). The existence of cannibalism in a given culture held so much weight during this time of Western exploration that it effectually re-defined the people in question, as is evidenced by James Cook’s journal of his voyages in the South Pacific during the late 1700s. Studying Cook’s notes, it is possible to “note the upper case ‘C’ as the ‘Natives’ become the ‘Canibals’: eating human flesh always erases any other possible ethnic or national identification” (Hulme 1998:22).

OTHERING

It is common practice to attribute to outsiders, specifically to those who are feared and distrusted, some general condition of barbaric or disgusting conduct, a process known as “othering.” Through this process, the cannibal provides us with the means to recognize and define an outside group “in terms of their horrifying man-eating propensities” (Arens 1988:63) and understand them as somehow less-than-human. This works to define and solidify identity with a group by lessening the political and social threat that the outside

group is perceived to pose, as an amoral group of physical predators. Cannibalism acts as a tool for establishing borders separating “us” and “them,” the moral and the amoral, the civilized and the savage, the human and the nonhuman. Thus, “the belief that outsiders are cannibals appears to be an unconscious but effective mechanism for maintaining self-identity, social superiority, and ‘humanness’ at the cost of the identity, social-status, and ‘humanness’ of aliens” (Pickering 1999:54). Within this perspective, the best way to elevate oneself to a higher level of morality and civilization is by demoting others to a level below human, where they become simply the “other.”

The process of “othering” occurs across and within all cultures;² it is not “some peculiar feature of Western thought, since the accusation of cannibalism against others is pandemic” (Arens 1998:41). For example, the Bimin-Kuskusmin of the West Sepik area of Papua New Guinea are said to engage in the restricted prescribed, ritual consumption of certain body parts of certain people, by certain people. They reject, however, the practices of the nearby Miyanmin, who “eat bodies *in toto* and with little sense of ceremony and etiquette” (Poole 1983:7) consuming human flesh as “food” in an ordinary sense. From the Bimin-Kuskusmin perspective,

Anthropophagic acts that don’t take into account of matters of gender, kinship, ritual status, and bodily substance in ritually prescribed ways are held to be signs of desperation, derangement, or denial of the moral and social attributes and capacities of full personhood and true humanity. Thus, the cannibalistic practices of socially and culturally distant groups are often viewed as barbaric and inhuman. [Poole 1983: 9]

For the Bimin-Kuskusmin, these features of Miyanmin cannibalism “are held to be signs of true barbarism” (Poole 1983:7). Additionally, the Bimin-Kuskusmin conceptualize their world as divided regionally on an ethnic map of anthropophagic practices. The zones of the map are: “true men,” “human men,” “human creatures,” and “animal-men beings” (Poole

² Similar in concept to Edward Said’s “Orientalism”

1983:8). “True men” are the group closest in cultural practice to the Bimin-Kuskusmin, with whom the Bimin-Kuskusmin will interact most. The “animal-men beings,” however, are the antithesis of “proper moral and jural order... deformed monsters, who possess few vestiges of moral and social responsibility, [and] are renowned for heinous acts of indiscriminate cannibalism, incest, and murder” (Poole 1983:12). This basic description of how the Bimin-Kuskusmin understand their world and differentiate themselves from “others” on the basis of certain practices clearly demonstrates the practice of “othering.”

Despite its universal occurrence, however, the process of “othering” has been most “fully explored in its Western manifestations, as an aspect of legitimating ideology of colonialism, missionization, and other forms of cultural imperialism” (Rumsey 1999:105). The attribution of cannibalism to outsiders, or “others” in this way has worked to perpetuate the idea that the “other” is different, and that different is dangerous. Cannibalism is, “as practice or accusation—quite simply the mark of greatest imaginable cultural difference and therefore the greatest challenge to our categories of understanding” (Hulme 1998:20). Therefore, as Goldman stated, “cannibalism is here, as it has always been, a quintessential symbol of alterity, an entrenched metaphor of cultural xenophobia” (Goldman 1999:1). Considering the use and effects of “othering,” it is clear why European discourse and understanding of cannibalism in the nineteenth-century were dependent on the opposition between concepts of the primitive other and the civilized self.

In its modern application, not only is the process of “othering” through the attribution of cannibalism used to distinguish outsiders, but it is also projects it as a practice of the past. In this way, the Western view relies on insulating the occurrence of cannibalism both to other peoples and other times, so as to “relocate savagery in its most gruesome form

by calling into existence man-eaters at the fringes of our time and space” (Arens 1979:46). Additionally, more recent usage of the term “cannibal” has been “applied as a term of abuse, not of individuals, but of entire societies” (Pickering 1999:51) as the solidification of the barbarism of its association with the exotic other is hardened.

2. Social Evolution Theory

Another primary branch of thought that has influenced Western views of cannibalism is the theory of social evolution.³ In the Renaissance and earlier stages of history, the native inhabitants of the New Worlds were understood and described by religious difference. There was no consideration for racial or national identification because those concepts were not yet fully solidified or important; rather, the explorers were Christians, and the natives they discovered were pagans who needed to be converted. The eighteenth-century, through the Enlightenment, saw a shift in the ideals that described people by religious difference, especially driven by Darwin’s theory of evolution and natural selection. As Europeans explored and colonized the world, they became exposed to peoples and practices completely alien to them. Social evolution theory, popular within early anthropology, was pursued as an extension of Darwin’s theory applied to explain the differences they were encountering. Just as species evolve over time, gradually reaching higher complexity, social evolutionism states that culture, too, evolves along a scale of complexity. While Darwin’s theory of evolutionary biology focuses on the selection of physical traits, social evolution emphasizes behavioral and cultural traits.

³ What I will refer to as “Social Evolution Theory” is conceptually consistent with the theory of unilineal cultural evolution. I will use the former term throughout this thesis because it is the term most commonly used by my sources.

The early application of this theory was dictated by unilineal cultural evolution, a concept that describes a single line of development defined by a sequence of stages that classify a culture's evolutionary progress. According to this theory, all cultures move through the same progression, passing the same stages, though at differing paces. Originally, the line of social evolution was composed of three stages: savagery, barbarism, and civilization. The lowest point on the scale, savagery, is the most simple, primitive form of society; the highest, civilization, is the most complex, illustrated by contemporary Western society. Each stage on the scale was differentiated largely in terms of traits and development: cannibalism was one trait attributed to barbaric, lesser evolved societies. Tannahill (1975) provided the following description, explaining the process by which this evolution occurs using the example of cannibalism:

For as long as man remained a hunter and plant-gatherer, with only limited control over his food supply, he was sometimes of necessity a part-time cannibal. But when some men learned to cultivate the soil, settled down, and became farmers, and others turned into pastoral nomads, driving their herds of domesticated animals over vast tracts of country, the need for supplementary food began to diminish... human flesh in a society here there were plenty of alternatives came to be reserved for occasions of the most solemn ceremonial. [Tannahill 1975:17]

As a trait seen in “lower” societies that were largely characterized as hunter-gatherer food economies, cannibalism also reflected a society’s state of ethical evolution: “As law and religion developed and became institutionalized, they began to erect a scaffolding of morality and rectitude, and gradually there grew up a climate of opinion that was opposed to the casual eating of human flesh” (Tannahill 1975:18). Thus, during the Enlightenment, with the emergence of social evolutionary theory, the focus turned away from difference framed by religion and towards consideration of “material causes [which] recast the history of mankind in a single continuum, with societies ranked lower or higher on the same scale”

(Lindenbaum 2004:488). Additionally, seeing that early anthropologists explained cultural variation observed in different societies they encountered as being at different stages on the evolutionary scale, this view led to the conclusion that simple contemporary societies, serving as kinds of living museums, resembled ancient societies.

ENDURING IMPACT

Modern anthropologists have largely rejected social evolution, at least in its unilineal evolutionary form, as a valid anthropological theory. The most basic complaint against it is that it cannot account for all cultural differences. Additionally, it allows for vastly unsubstantiated generalizations. Again, considering the case of cannibalism, evolutionary thought created a situation “wherein while cannibalism was to be considered proof of a primitive stage in human development, any group exhibiting a perceived stage of development... was therefore to be considered a cannibal” (Pickering 1999:63). Thus, it provides an exceedingly ethnocentric explanation for cultural variation, with the Western model and practices as the ideal.

Despite the widespread rejection of unilineal cultural evolution as a valid anthropological theory, some of the basic elements of thought that influenced the theory have persisted into modern viewpoints concerning the exotic and the “other.” Just as the theory supported the conclusion that contemporary simple societies resembled ancient societies, it also supported the claim that simple societies illustrate the less evolved form of civilization. Hoffman (2014) provides testimony for the residual influence of social evolutionary theory in his own research. Concerning his mindset in the beginning stages of his research into Asmat headhunting in New Guinea, he states that he hoped to “see if these naked men whose pursuit of sacred heads... might be a mirror of a younger, more elemental

self, a self before all the complications of technology and civilization” (Hoffman 2014:17). Later, he demonstrates the conflict in his mind between the notions of unilineal evolution and his knowledge as an anthropologist:

[I was led to] the idea that traditional tribal societies living in the jungle might show me the root of something. Of who we are. Contemporary anthropologists long ago abandoned the idea that there was some sort of steady, linear march from primitive to civilized and now discount the notion that modern, technically advanced cultures are any more ‘civilized’ than ones like the Asmat, with all its complexities. [Hoffman 2014: 45]

Yet, despite this awareness, he still explained how he “Felt that they might offer insight into humans in an uncorrupted state,” and he wanted to “glean insights into man’s propensity for violence and war” (Hoffman 2014:99). Thus, even though scholars are aware that the concepts behind social evolutionary theory are not valid, the general notions that drove the concepts still linger in the background of the Western view of cannibalism.

Tannahill

Tannahill employed the notion that simple contemporary societies resemble ancient societies in her 1975 publication, *Flesh & Blood: A History of the Cannibal Complex*. In this work, she provides another example of how the fundamental elements behind social evolution theory can persist into modern scholarship, despite the theory itself having been rejected. She does not explicitly say that she believes in social evolution theory, and does not mention it as a theory that guided her work. In attempting to outline a history of cannibalism, however, a hint of social evolutionary thought can be detected as she follows the notion that we can essentially read the minds of early humans by interpreting “the thought-patterns of primitive peoples who have survived into modern times” (Tannahill 1975:5). She thus makes suggestions as to what early human thought-processes were

“insofar as it is possible to judge from the beliefs of primitive peoples today” (Tannahill 1975:10).

One way she applies this concept is by suggesting that if societies had not been pushed to evolve due to changes in their environment, we would be able to find the beliefs of our earlier ancestors among our simpler contemporaries simply because they would have shared an economic form: “Because the history of the last ten thousand years has encouraged settled farming at the expense of cattle-herding economies... it is virtually impossible to isolate early nomadic beliefs in their ‘pure’ form” (Tannahill 1975:22). Thus, if there had not been a push towards settled farming, people would have remained hunter-gatherers, which would have preserved the beliefs that early nomads had thousands of years ago.

Another way in which she applies this concept is in interpreting archaeological evidence of a human skull shrine at Monte Circeo on the Italian coast. She provides two possible interpretations: first, that it evidences a mercy-killing of an old and respected tribe member; second, that it evidences ritual murder and brain-eating. The second theory, she states, is based on “...customs of certain primitive tribes that have survived into modern times, without—it is claimed—their traditions having been distorted by contact with people or knowledge from the outside world” (Tannahill 1975:15). Another example is in her explanation of how “...use of human beings as symbolic fertilizers is well attested, at much later periods of history, among peoples whose social development remained at a level not much more advanced than that of prehistoric Egypt” (Tannahill 1975:21). She continues to reference the American Pawnees who, in the nineteenth-century, “killed a girl of the Sioux and sprinkled her blood on the seeds” (Tannahill 1975:21). In this case, she is locating the

Pawnees at the same stage of evolutionary development as societies of prehistoric Egypt, simply because of a generally shared custom. This reflects a feature of evolution theory, which uses “primitive” people as living fossils of what we once were like.

Tannahill’s work in general, and these examples in particular, demonstrate how some of the basic elements of contemporary perceptions of the practice of cannibalism are in line with the elements of social evolutionary theory. Although anthropologist today largely reject the theory, what is important here is that some of the fundamental particulars of the theory continue to have influence on how both scholars and non-scholars think about the topic.

3. Colonialism

Much of European history is defined by its colonial achievements, which, although motivated by the need for raw materials, expanding territory, and defense, were often justified as spreading civilization to savage and barbaric societies that could not help themselves. For years, accounts and examinations of cannibalism were considered through the European viewpoint, which, through the perspective of colonialism, presented itself as the fully developed ideal of civilization. Similar to the influences that guided social evolutionary theory, “the theory of natural selection and evolution in natural history was appropriated and misapplied to human history to provide a political and moral justification for conquest and rule” (Pickering 1999:63). The concept of social evolution let colonizers “justify alienation of lands and destruction of alien societies when motivated by the belief that the dispossessed would benefit from the technological, political, social, religious, and moral superiority of the invader” (Pickering 1999:63). This is, of course, well aligned with

Eric Wolf's claims in *Europe and the People Without History*, in which he argues that the victors write the historical accounts according to how they, as conquerors, see fit.

As colonial activities expanded into the Americas, Africa, and the Pacific, reports of cannibalism increased, providing reports that were interpreted as proof of its existence as a feature of life in the non-Western world. It was then concluded, "...if cannibalism featured prominently in accounts of those parts of the world, it was because it was so prominent a practice that accounts could not ignore it" (Hulme 1998:3). Similar to how social evolution theory framed cannibalism as a trait of lesser-evolved societies, the colonial mindset framed it as a trait that characterized the areas of the world that had not yet been civilized by European intervention. Explaining how cannibalism was a trait that demonstrated the inferiority of Aboriginal society, which justified European interference, Pickering (1999) quoted Howitt (1854:301):

Their cannibalism, their practice of infanticide, and their strange superstition that everyone who dies a natural death has died from evil acts of an enemy who has eaten his kidney fat, and therefore must be avenged, would, had not the white man come, in time have exterminated the race. [Pickering 1999:64]

Thus, cannibalism "...forced itself up on our attention, and we merely registered our horror and buckled down ever more robustly to the civilizing mission" (Hulme 1998:3). Through their involvement with "...the Caribs, Aztecs, Pacific Islanders, and various African, Native American, and New Guinea 'tribes' ... Western culture has congratulated itself for putting a stop to this cultural excess through colonial 'pacification' and introducing Christianity to once-benighted natives" (Arens 1998:41). In this context, the existence of cannibalism made it impossible for Europeans to ignore the necessity of expanding their influence and knowledge to the ignorant savages who practiced it. The importance of the influence of

colonialism on Western views of cannibalism is that it gives us insight into the colonial influence and the general ideas behind early cannibal reports.

COLONIAL CALUMNY

In the 1990s, a full counter-narrative emerged,⁴ reversing the version that justified European colonial exploits. In this counter-narrative, "...cannibalism is merely a product of the European imagination, it was never practiced anywhere, it was a calumny imposed by European colonizers to justify their outrages, it had its origins in the disturbed European psyche, it is a tool of Empire" (Hulme 1998:3). This version must be considered carefully, as counter-narratives often run the risk of oversimplifying the topic they discuss. There is ample support, however, for the view of cannibalism as "a calumny used by colonizers to justify their predatory behavior" (Lindenbaum 2004:476). This view is strengthened by a reconsideration of the sites of cannibal attributions throughout history: "fifteenth-century Caribbean, sixteenth-century Meso-America, nineteenth-century Africa, and finally, mid twentieth-century New Guinea Highlands. Each, in its time, served as the latest outpost of Western expansion and its cannibal denizens were identified by the then-prevailing institutional creators of knowledge" (Arens 1998:40). Thus, it is suggested that the image of the cannibal was created as a political form of domination, validating Western colonialist aims by creating and perpetuating the negative stereotype of exotic flesh-eaters. Through this interpretation, Hulme argues that "even for skeptics, cannibalism does exist: it exists as a term within colonial discourse to describe the ferocious devouring of human flesh supposedly practiced by some savages" (Hulme 1998:4). One lasting effect of this counter-narrative is that for some, it is seen as a call to "dismiss existing explanatory accounts of

⁴ The reason it emerged at this time is suggested later (Part II, Ch.4)

cannibalism for a particular people as vulgar sensationalism” (Arens 1998:45). The argument can be interpreted to mean that cannibalism never existed at all, but rather was simply made up by colonizers to justify their aims.

Also vital to the discussion of cannibalism within the context of colonialism is the concept of racism. The notion of racism was a fundamental facet driving imperialism, as racism “operates to undermine inter-group understanding and empathy, and thereby to perpetuate or extend an oppressive economic and political structure” (Phillips 1998:192). Colonizers were able to debase native populations by using racism to deny the unity of mankind between Europeans and Africans, evoking the weight of white supremacy (Phillips 1998:192). Swayed by the racial dimension, cannibal discourse in the colonial period fell into the tendency “to associate cannibalistic practice with darkness of skin, so the Caribs and Melanesians were more likely to be accused than the Arawaks or Polynesians” (Hulme 1998:30). Conversely, “suspicion of cannibal practice could land native groups in those supposedly descriptive categories and miraculously darken their skin” (Hulme 1998:30). With this in mind, we can be more objective when considering people to whom the practice of cannibalism was attributed.

4. Western Cannibal Obsession

Despite its absolute revulsion for cannibal practices, the West simultaneously maintains a perennial fascination with the topic. Combined each of the influences that make up the Western view of cannibalism fit together to form the base of the Western Cannibal Obsession. Scholars have discussed this obsession in many different contexts. In one perspective, the obsession is what poses a danger to anthropologists who consider focusing

their studies on cannibalism.⁵ Western audiences crave the stereotype of cannibalism that can be presented through such studies, and sometimes, scholarly analysis only feeds this craving.

Another proposed effect of the obsession is that people go looking for it. Hoffman (2014) offered this as a possible explanation for the theories surrounding Michael Rockefeller's 1961 death in New Guinea. It is widely believed that Rockefeller was killed by the Asmat and consumed as part of a cannibalistic ritual. As to why certain Dutch missionaries were so determined to declare Rockefeller's death to have taken place in this manner, and why he himself was so fascinated with the idea of it, Hoffman suggested:

Cannibalism is the apex of otherness, the greatest transgression, the thing that makes people less than human, and maybe the missionaries wanted to believe the Asmat had killed and eaten Michael... And maybe I wanted to believe too. Maybe that belief was what we all wanted. It confirmed our image of the Asmat as both horrific and exotic and reflected back on us, made us seem bolder, more intrepid, braver... our need to believe that these people existed and that we were among them. [Hoffman 2014:224-5]

Thus, we must consider the strength that the obsession has, and its power to coerce us into searching for cannibalism wherever it seems most likely to be found.

CHANGE IN VIEWS

In our current, postmodern world, the ideas of exoticism and the primitive no longer have the foothold in Western ideals that they once had, weakening the influence they have on Western viewpoints. Lindenbaum (2004) claims that exoticism and the notion of the primitive are "Western constructs linked to the exploring/conquering/cataloging impulse from the late fifteenth-century to the present, a concept now undermined by changing historical and material conditions" (Lindenbaum 2004:490). In a world where cultures have

⁵ The concern some anthropologists (Goldman 1999; Gardner 1999) have that studies of cannibalism would act to perpetuate stereotypes of the practice was discussed (Part I, Ch.3)

constant influence on each other, especially with the combining of multiple cultures into one community, those who were previously deemed “exotic” are now living among us. The difference between the Westerner and the “other” is less defined, and there has been an increased difficulty for the West to assert its cultural superiority universally. This has resulted in a turning point in how we think about cannibalism. In the past, 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.” With the rise in values of the equality of mankind, however, Lindenbaum has noted an atmosphere of postcolonial guilt and imperial self-blame, which has transformed the previous attitude pursued by Westerners, so “denial about ourselves has been extended to denial on behalf of those we wish to rehabilitate and acknowledge as our equals” (Lindenbaum 2004:491). The figure of cannibalism, once used by the process of exclusion to identify the “other,” can now be used in reverse to deconstruct the boundaries it previously established.

NEW OPPORTUNITY FOR STUDY

In light of the change in views that are currently occurring within anthropology in relation to cannibalism studies, we are confronted with an especially opportune time to conduct the study at hand. This study, and the others it is inspired by, have “Seized upon a juncture in anthropology—a time that perhaps witnesses the end to the serious academic exploration of exoticism” (Goldman 1999:3).

While interest in the topic of cannibalism is not unique to the West, “overwhelming evidence suggests that the attribution of man-eating to non-Western peoples in general and to ‘primitives’ and ‘savages’ in particular is a Western obsession” (Obeyesekere 2005:1-2). For this reason, we will pursue the question posed by Hulme: “why were Europeans so

desirous of finding confirmation of their suspicions of cannibalism?” (Hulme 1998:4). Amending Hulme’s inquiry, however, I want to extend the question to ask: why do Westerners remain so desirous of maintaining attributions of cannibalism, as original studies and sources of evidence undergo renewed examination.

5. Discourse

In the interstitial space between ethnographic enterprises and public preconceptions lies a recognition that cannibalism invariably implies a set of *products, producers, and processes*. The point of their convergence... is in the discourse of anthropophagy, where producers of all persuasions are playing in structurally similar ways, for similar reasons, with their ingestive metaphors and symbols. Any mooted distance between these mythmakers across history, landscape, or culture is chimerical. [Goldman 1999:2-3]

Across the collection of postmodernist intellectual reexaminations of the notion of cannibalism, one critical concept remains constant – discourse. The *discourse* of cannibalism is separate from the practice itself: what is called “cannibalism” is actually a discourse about the practice of cannibalism rather than a portrayal of its practice. Following this logic, it has been argued that cannibalism must be recognized as a “product of imaginative discourse, our engagement with the topic will always signal to some extent a ludic journey” (Goldman 1999:5). The discourse, then, reveals more about relationships between Europeans and “others” than it does about the practice of cannibalism.

The work of Michel Foucault is the most important source for understanding the concept of discourse as it exists within contemporary anthropology. The distinctive feature of Foucault’s conception of discourse is its focus on the wider social processes of legitimization and power. Mainly, he concentrated on the link between knowledge and power:

Knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of 'the truth' but has the power to make itself true. All knowledge, once applied in the real world, has effects, and in that sense at least, 'becomes true.' Knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and the disciplining of practice. Thus, 'there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations. [Foucault 1977:27]

Within this framework, Foucault considered the formation of current truths, as well as the systems through which they are maintained. He discussed regimes of truth, which are the historic mechanisms through which discourses are produced, functioning as true within a specific time and place. Certain discourses have constructed knowledge systems that have gained the status of “truth”; these “truths” have come to dictate how we define and arrange ourselves within our own social world, as well as how we classify others in a separate world.

For our purposes, the importance of Foucault’s discussion lies in the ability of discourse to establish rules that prescribe how we talk about, think about, and contextualize a given topic. Cannibalism was seen as a threatening practice on the horizon of the Western world; in order to gain mastery over it, it became necessary to subjugate it at the level of language. Discourse, Foucault argues (1977), constructs a topic and dictates the way it can be implicitly talked and reasoned about. Additionally, it constructs a set of conceptual boundaries of thought and language use for the topic.

Foucault discusses institutions within a society—such as armies, schools, prisons—that create the themes and topics to be discussed. In this thesis, I am expanding on this idea so that the “institution” is the Western world, which created a language for talking about “others.” Choosing to consider the notion of discourse “is to insist on two emphases, not always present in discussions of cannibalism: on the agency of those described as cannibals - difficult to access but necessary to posit; and on the relationship between describer and

described, between Europe and its others” (Hulme 1998:6). Cannibalism, as we know it, can be considered as a discourse originated by the West, composed of images of the Western perception of what cannibalism is. In this sense, “the discourse on cannibalism conducted by British officers represented... cannibalism in terms of British values, fantasies, and myth models” (Obeyesekere 1992:643) so that cannibalism was constructed out of a complex dialogue between the West and the “other,” dictated by “the history of contact and unequal power relations and the cultural values [and] fantasies... they both share” (Obeyesekere 1992:650). The West effectively created a word and a concept, and forced the “others” into it. In this way, we must consider discourse as a culturally constructed representation of reality, not an exact copy; “cannibalism,” as it appears in a range of sources, is a discourse *on* the practice of cannibalism, which illustrates a culturally constructed representation of the practice, not the reality of it.

The construction of discourse extends beyond speech: “it is embedded in a historical and cultural context and expressed often in the frame of a scenario or cultural performance. It is about practice: the practice of science, the practice of cannibalism. Insofar as discourse evolves it begins to affect the practice” (Obeyesekere 1992:650). For this reason, the concept of discourse is of particular importance for this thesis. The discourse on cannibalism has far reaching effects, which we will consider later on. It affects both how cannibalism is practiced and experienced,⁶ and also how scholars approach and study the topic.⁷

⁶ Effects of discourse on cannibal practices will be discussed (Part V, Ch.3)

⁷ Effects of discourse on anthropological studies will be discussed (Part IV)

Part III:

Impact of Obsession on Sources of Evidence for Cannibalism

Having established the basic components that comprise the Western obsession with cannibalism, we have studied the various elements that form the foundation of the Western Cannibal Complex, a product of the Western discourse on cannibalism. The various factors that influence the Western view of cannibalism, establishing the obsession, and thus informing the discourse, have had a considerable effect on anthropological studies of cannibalism. Careful reevaluation of cannibalism studies can reveal that much of the “evidence” on the topic of institutionalized cannibalism is highly subject to the same influences that created our popular Western viewpoint in the first place. The effect of these influences has had a significant impact on the evidence that has been used to support cannibalism analyses, “such that the experimental proof of... cannibalism are as much science as they are fantasy” (Obeyesekere 1992:641). In fact, it has been argued that some of the commonly referenced evidence for cannibalism is the product of this Western discourse fantasy, rather than experiential reality. This argument is supported by the observation that when cannibalism disappeared among the Maori, (as a result of the 1840 treaty of Waitangi) it “resurged in the Marquesas and Fiji... One can even make the case... that the decline of Maori cannibalism in the European consciousness was the ‘cause’ of the rise of the Fijian practice” (Obeyesekere 1998:64).

For this portion of the study, Arens and his arguments⁸ come back into our focus. Arens' critique of the literary accounts that were seen to provide proof of cannibalism was "based on his considerations of various written accounts, which are shown to be of uneven quality, reliant on secondhand reports and hearsay, and where the reporters were often beacons of bigotry steeped in fundamentalist and ethnocentric ideology" (Goldman 1999:13). Pickering (1999) took a similar approach as he set out to argue that there is no reliable evidence to support claims of institutionalized cannibalism in Aboriginal societies. He claimed:

This is evident through the critical examination of the most popular and available literary sources—those that colored, and color, public opinion, and those that are most relied upon by contemporary commentators and researchers. I describe the poor quality of early reports, the paucity of evidence, the lack of consistency between descriptions, and the contextual questions that underlie the most graphic descriptions. I then consider why such accounts should prove so popular to writers and readers alike. [Pickering 1999:52]

Arens' critique and Pickering's method both mirror the objective pursued in the chapters of this Part III. In fact, Pickering's approach mirrors the process through which we will reevaluate the evidence for cannibalism so perfectly that I believe his description of his methods is a sufficient guide for this study to follow. First will be a basic review of the possible influences that can pollute a source before it reaches the hands of an anthropologist; there is no untouched evidence. Next will be an examination of the influences that motivated early cannibalism reports. Then, we will consider the public demand for reports of cannibalism among non-Western cultures that likely fueled the production of the aforementioned sources of evidence. Finally, an in-depth look into the production of the

⁸ The points of Arens' arguments that were identified as relevant to address in this thesis were described (Part I, Ch.4)

cannibal narratives will allow us to reassess their credibility as sources that can be considered anthropological evidence.

1. No Untouched Evidence

To introduce the discussion of issues with sources of evidence for the practice of cannibalism, I will refer to a description provided by Pickering, illustrating kinds of evidence in the form of a pyramid:

The collection of accounts of cannibalism and their attendant characteristics is best visualized as a pyramid, at the very tip of which lies the very small number of detailed accounts—those that make at least some effort to substantiate their allegations. Forming the base and body of the pyramid are the larger number of unsourced accounts and blanket assertions. [Pickering 1999:62]

ORIGIN OF EVIDENCE

The most basic problem anthropologists face when attempting to study cannibalism is the sources of the available evidence. The reality is that there are virtually no accounts of any observer directly witnessing a cannibalistic event. This is a major component of Arens' conclusion in *The Man-Eating Myth* that evidence is “insufficient to justify labeling them as cannibals. The pattern was, and still is, to document—in a literal sense—the existence of cannibalism after the cessation of the presumed activity, rather than to observe and describe it in the present tense” (Arens 1998:41). Instead of having a basis in direct observation, even the primary evidence is largely constructed out of belief or secondhand reports rather than concrete proof.

Firsthand accounts are defined as those based on the personal experience of the researcher or the researcher's informants. Secondhand accounts are those not directly experienced by the researcher but acquired through outside testimony. According to

Pickering, most of the literary accounts (72%) of Aboriginal cannibalism “were probably derived from unsourced and secondhand sources—an important consideration when a popular misconception today is that the frequency of references in the literature indicates the reality and frequency of cannibalism” (Pickering 1990:54-55). The problem with reports of this nature, he explains, is that “the original account was often multiplied and modified by repetitive telling, greatly exaggerating the alleged frequency of the act. Incautious repetition and misquotation similarly led to fictions, misinterpretations, further misquotations, errors, and abuse quickly becoming established as accepted as facts” (Pickering 1990:54-55). While he warns that we cannot immediately dismiss such accounts as fallacies, we also cannot accept them as truthful portrayals. He concludes:

There can be no doubt that the majority of the accounts were based on hearsay and on popularized, fabricated, exaggerated, and misinterpreted evidence. If any of the unsourced and secondhand accounts were ever based on real acts of cannibalism rather than on manufactured mythologies of reporters, these events have certainly become exaggerated in their frequency through repeated telling and the subsequent acceptance of each retelling as a specific event. As a result, unsourced and secondhand accounts must be dismissed as primary evidence for or against the reality of cannibalism. [Pickering 1999:55]

With this in mind, we must take particular care to acknowledge the origin of the sources we consider.

INTERROGATION METHODS

Another problem anthropologists face when confronting evidence for cannibalism is the methodology of the investigator. This arises in the form of leading questions raised by investigators, which appear across sources of evidence for cannibalism, both in the form of questionnaires and direct conversations.

The issue of leading questions appears in Pickering’s (1999) discussion of his claim that a characteristic of all studies of cannibalism (including his own) is that they “rely on

sources where cannibalism is described rather than on those accounts where cannibalism is not reported or is even specifically denied” (Pickering 1999:53). He explains that this is particularly evident when accounts are based on responses to questionnaires, which were a common method of collecting data during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The questionnaires were sent to pastors, missionaries, and other people of authority working in areas of interest. As a typical example of such a questionnaire, Pickering provided an excerpt from Curr (1886:194), which asked:

35. Are your blacks cannibals? Please mention the grounds of your opinion or belief in the subject.

36. If they are cannibals, to what extent; and what are their practices with respect to cannibalism?

[Pickering 1999:53]

After providing this excerpt, Pickering continues to pursue his original argument by considering the responses these questions provoked. For our purposes, however, the importance remains with the questions themselves. It is easy to notice the implications behind such questions, which illustrate to the informant what responses are expected, and direct a specific response. Thus, we must also pay attention to the nature and format of questions and, in general, research methodology, to consider if they might have led to the responses they produced.

2. Preconceptions Behind Shipboard Journalism

The next step we must take in reexamining preexisting studies of cannibalism is to consider the men behind the reports; the preconceptions that influenced how early reporters interacted and recorded their exchanges with native populations. The spread and influence of such early sources was so wide that “until about one hundred years ago, knowledge of actual

cannibal practices rested on a heap of travelers' tales, missionary testimonies, conquerors' apologetics, diplomatic and administrative reports, and the like" (Tuzin & Brown 1983:1). The problem these narratives present to contemporary anthropologists is that they are not solid ethnographic texts. In the context of Maori cannibalism, Obeyesekere warned that such sources are treated as reality of cannibalism rather than as an interpretation of it. He concluded:

We know that those people who wrote about cannibalism in the nineteenth century were even less sophisticated and self-critical than [more recent observers]. Thus any attempt to construct Maori cannibalism in this fashion is to me extremely dubious, since the discourse is often equated with the practice... [Obeyesekere 1992:650]

Although considered "historical texts," they were created through Western prejudices; the resulting image of cannibalism in these texts more closely resembles colonial fantasy and myopia than it does scientifically based truth.

Even as scholars began to take a more intellectual interest in methodology, the idea that cannibalism was a characteristic of primitive societies was still prominent. Illustrated through the case of Fiji "if one takes literally the accounts of cannibalism... then Fiji was indeed the haunt of 'cannibals' by the early nineteenth century" (Obeyesekere 2005:155). Outlined by Pickering, as applied to his study of the attribution of cannibalism to Aborigines:

There is no doubt that the works of nineteenth-century authors like Taplin, Curr, Howitt, Smyth, Roth, Mathews, and Spencer and Gillen contained valuable information and brought Aboriginal societies to anthropological prominence. However, there is also no doubt that while they did not share all of the aggressive prejudices of Australian colonial society (e.g., settlers, missionaries, police), they did share some of the same basic conceptions regarding the status of Aboriginal people as low on the scale of human social evolution. [Pickering 1999:65]

Thus, as explained by Pickering, "historical documents must be assessed in the light of the contemporary theories—scientific, popular, political, and religious—that prevailed at the

time and may have influenced the authors” (Pickering 1999:62). We must therefore reexamine the motivations and presumptions behind early accounts, keeping in mind that assumption came to dictate inquiry and findings.

MOTIVATIONS

Beginning in the time of exploration, “the popular Western imagination of cannibalism has been shaped by the accounts of early explorers, missionaries, colonial officers, travelers, and others,” (Goldman 1999:13) who were untrained in the contemporary anthropological method.⁹ For the most part, early writers were dilettantes, only casually observing the cultures they encountered without any professional background. They wrote according to the larger genre their writing fit into, were manipulated by the popular discourses, and echoed the popular views of the time. Pickering (1999) quoted an observation made by Barwick (1984:103):

The nineteenth-century gentlemen whose ethnographic publications influence modern research were not mere scribes: their jealousies, ambitions, loyalties and roles in colonial society shaped their inquiries and the content of their publications. They cannot be blamed for the ignorance which blinded them and others of their time to the complexity of indigenous concepts... But we should not forget that they wrote for a contemporary audience and their views were, sometimes, mere propaganda in the contemporary political context... [Pickering 1999:64]

We then must be careful to consider what factors encouraged such reports. For one, they had to appeal to their target audience.¹⁰ Next, they were loaded with a range of preconceptions, which dictated the form of their writing (this will be addressed in the following section of this chapter). Finally, they were subject to greater trends of political and social thought of their time.

⁹ The issue of early writers and their reports for contemporary anthropology was discussed (Part I, Ch.1)

¹⁰ The demand made by the British reading public for tales of cannibalism in non-Western Cultures will be discussed (Part III, Ch.2)

Recognizing the influence the development of trends of thought is particularly beneficial when considering historical documents addressing cannibalism. With knowledge of the general political and social context in which a document was created, we can better view its content in light of theories of the time. One of these trends was that of social evolution,¹¹ which was highly influential to the literature about cannibalism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as “few people who wrote at that time doubted that men and institutions everywhere must have developed through a fixed sequence of set stages from savagery and barbarism to civilization” (Stanner 1969:36 quoted in Pickering 1999:63). For this reason, their writing reproduced the “ignorance” of their time. Such sources must be evaluated with this in mind.

PRECONCEPTIONS

For such early observers—missionaries, officers, and explorers—“cannibalism was an active cultural sign of tyranny, brutality, and excess, in the mainstream tradition of early travellers” (Hulme 1998:33). The strong preconceptions travelers had of the cultures they would come into contact with during their travels are deeply embedded in their writings. Pickering (1999) explained how even once scholars came to take a more intellectual interest in Aboriginal cannibalism, they shared some of the earlier preconceptions that Aborigines were less socially evolved:

Many of their interpretations of observations are thus colored by preconceptions as to what institutions and practices were to be expected. Cannibalism was one such institution, and these authors were to write prolifically on the subject. Conjecture became an established method of inquiry in... professional anthropology. [Pickering 1999:65]

¹¹ The theory and popular perception motivated by social evolution theory was discussed (Part II, Ch.2)

Such preconceptions led travelers to expect to find cannibalism as a ritual practice among the peoples they encountered. This became problematic, and remains problematic for its residual effect on sources of evidence, when expectations dictated reporting: “The reputation of Papua New Guinea societies for cannibalism directly influenced the reporting of such practices in neighboring Australia” (Goldman 1999:16).

In continuation of his discussion of the issues with evidence of cannibalism created by interrogation methods,¹² Pickering provides further examples of how preconceptions color the methods of questioning. He discusses how many Aboriginal admissions of practicing cannibalism need to be reassessed considering interrogation methods. He notes that many accounts demonstrate that “badgering of informants until they provided an answer satisfying the observers’ preconceptions” (Pickering 1999:58). As an example, he quotes the account of Lang (1861:386-387) concerning the Aborigines of Wide Bay in Queensland:

After talking with the black for some time, it struck me that I had then an excellent opportunity of questioning him as to the practice of cannibalism amongst his tribe, and I proceeded to take advantage of it by asking him, without comment or preface, if the bodies had been eaten. He pretended disgust at the bare idea of such a thing, and denied that the Wide Bay Blacks were ever cannibals. I merely asked, in reply to his denial, “if the bodies had been cut up, and when they would be eaten”. He now evidently supposed that I knew all about the matter, but would not give a direct reply to my questions. He fairly committed himself, however, by saying “two of the bodies belonged to old men and were therefore put in a hole”. I asked, then, if the third man had been cut up, and he replied in the affirmative; stating in answer to the other questions, that the rite of cannibalism would be observed on the morrow... I had to speak to the black before me in such a manner as to assure him that I did not question in order to mock or upbraid; for I desired to get at the whole truth, which I perceived could not be taken by storm, but must be arrived at by stratagem. He told me, first, with regard to human flesh, that he had never eaten human flesh; afterward that he did not like the taste of it, and again, on my giving him a little encouragement to speak plainly, that it was “good and close up bullock,” or much like beef. [Pickering 1999:58]

¹² Pickering discussed how interrogation methods affected informant responses to questions about cannibalism (Part III, Ch.1)

Here, the interrogator's line of leading questions is clear. Moreover, the general language demonstrates his unwavering conviction that the man he was speaking to not only knew about plans for a cannibal event that was to take place the next day, but also had firsthand opinions about the flavor of human flesh.

DISREGARDED DENIALS

One important impact of such preconceptions was the tendency for denials of cannibalism to be interpreted as proof of its existence. Pickering describes the importance of this tendency, stating, "it is quite incredible how many authors judged a reticent response to be the result of shame at performing the act rather than shock at being asked the question (e.g., Beveridge 1889:28; Horne & Aiston 1924:47; Roth 1901:30)" (Pickering 1999:59). Instances of this are important demonstrations of how the expectation of cannibalism overruled the informant responses.

The tendency for denials to be disregarded is clearly illustrated through Cook's method of inquiry, demonstrated through accounts of his voyages in the South Pacific. Throughout accounts of the interactions Cook and his crew had with natives, there are descriptions in which the crew was "afforded an opportunity of informing ourselves, whether they were cannibals" (Lieutenant King 1973:69 quoted in Obeyesekere 1992:632). In one account, the question was posed towards a group of Hawaiians of whether they were cannibals.¹³ When confronted with the question, the account reports that in response, the Hawaiian informants "immediately shewed as much horror at the idea, as any European would have done" (Lieutenant King 1973:69 quoted in Obeyesekere 1992:632). In another instance, Cook again tried to confirm his hypothesis of Hawaiian cannibalism and received

¹³ Obeyesekere informs the reader that based on his criteria for definition, the Hawaiians did not, in fact, engage in cannibalistic practices.

another response of denial. For Cook, however, the response he received was considered to be proof of the practice. Obeyesekere warns that it was not only in Hawaii that questions about cannibalism produced such responses. He claims, “it was the same everywhere” (Obeyesekere 1992:634). As an example, he refers to an account concerning another island in the South Pacific, Mangaia, which the crew encountered in March 1777. Here, “Anderson, the ship’s doctor, ‘put the question if they ate human flesh which they answered in the negative with a mix of indignation and abhorrence” (William Anderson 1974 quoted in Obeyesekere 1992:634). Such accounts demonstrate how regardless of the replies, Cook was essentially convinced of cannibalism’s universal prevalence wherever he traveled.

In many cases, denial was interpreted as embarrassment for practicing cannibalism. In others, mere mention of the topic of cannibalism was interpreted as proof of its existence, as Pickering illustrated by quoting Sturt (1833:222-223):

Many of my readers may probably doubt this horrid occurrence having taken place, as I have not mentioned any corroborating circumstances. I am myself, however, as firmly persuaded of the truth of what I have stated as if I had seen the savage commit the act... Be that as it may, the very mention of such a thing among these people goes to prove they are capable of such an enormity. [Pickering 1999:59]

In response to this declaration by Sturt, Pickering boldly stated: “if, as Sturt suggests, the very mention of the topic is proof of its practice, then colonial writers on the subject must have been ravenous” (Pickering 1999:59).¹⁴ Statements like Sturt’s should lead us to consider what persuaded reporters of the regularity of the practice, in the absence of direct observation.

¹⁴ This idea, that the mention of cannibalism is proof of its practice, will become relevant (Part V, Ch.2) when we consider how natives interpreted white arrival and inquiries.

PUBLIC DEMAND

One of the primary questions that arose out of the discoveries that have been made through reexamining early accounts is: why is there such a preoccupation with the attribution of cannibalism despite various denials? This question brings us directly back to our original goal¹⁵ of considering why “Europeans were fascinated by the possibility of cannibalism among those they encountered, despite little evidence of the fact” (Arens 1998:44). Obeyesekere answers this question by explaining that cannibalism is what the European public, the audience for many of these accounts, wanted to hear; “it was their definition of the Savage” (Obeyesekere 1992:635). As the stage for such accounts, it was “Polynesia [that] gripped the European imagination in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (Obeyesekere 1998:79). For European readers, the appeal of such accounts laid in that they dealt with difference, with concepts and customs that were not readily observed within their society. The appeal of difference is rooted within “a yearning... for the sweets of that exhilarating, wild, natural life, so distinct from the artificial, craving, envious, selfish, and greedy life of civilization!” (Diapera 1928:82 quoted in Obeyesekere 1998:82).

In turn, this public demand dictated how writers performed their inquiry and formed their reports. We have already considered how Cook’s narratives demonstrate the crew’s expectation of encountering cannibals, and tendency to disregard denials of the practice.¹⁶ Obeyesekere (1992) suggested, “underlying the British officers’ detached ethnographic hypothesis of cannibalism was the British public’s demand for such information” (Obeyesekere 1992:636). The methods of inquiry pursued by the crew were stimulated by the demands of their readers.

¹⁵ The fundamental aims of this thesis were outlined (Part I, Ch.5)

¹⁶ This review of Cook’s narratives was (Part III, Ch.2)

3. European Cannibal Narratives and Yarning

Of the primary sources of evidence for cannibalism, a large number are gathered under the category of early European exploration testimonies. Such accounts constitute what we can refer to as European Cannibal Narratives. For many of these narratives, there is no concrete evidence to substantiate concerns that they may not reflect an experiential reality.¹⁷ There are several cases, however, that provide the opportunity for comparative analysis. In instances where there is more than one narrative describing the same set of events, for example, it is sometimes possible to find discrepancies between them. In such instances, we can identify embellishments and fabrications. This group can largely be classified by a separate literature category of fantasy.

These narratives present a problem in anthropological studies of cannibalism when they are confused with fact-based ethnographic testimony.¹⁸ Obeyesekere illustrates this concern by giving an example of how such “evidence” has been misapplied by well-regarded anthropologists:

In 1977 Fergus Clunie published his authoritative monograph on *Fiji Weapons and Warfare* containing detailed accounts of Fijian cannibalism, also based uncritically on such sources as John Jackson’s. More recently, in her comparative study of cannibalism, Peggy Sanday, relying entirely on the ethnographic information supplied by Sahlins and Clunie can, not unreasonably, describe Fiji as a ‘pure culture of the death instinct’ (Sanday 1986:151). [Obeyesekere 1998:65]

Obeyesekere identifies Sanday, Sahlins, and Clunie as three of the many anthropologists who have mistakenly believed such narratives to be concrete observances. In any field of academics, when scholars use rational accounts to support their work, they produce rational

¹⁷ Early reports including accounts of cannibalism were analyzed (Part III, Ch.2)

¹⁸ When confused for firsthand, fact-based evidence, the problem such narratives present to anthropological studies is also discussed (Part III, Ch.2 and Part IV)

projects; in the case of anthropology, when ethnographers use fantastic accounts to support their work, they produce ethnographic fantasy.

OBEYESEKERE CRITIQUES ETHNOGRAPHIC CONSTRUCTION

In his article published in 1998 “Cannibal feasts in nineteenth-century Fiji: seamen’s yarns and ethnographic imagination,” Obeyesekere defines his objective: “to ‘impeach’ the conventional cannibal testimonies and suggest that narratives such as Jackson’s are based on a genre of seamen’s yarns, hence totally unsuitable as an ethnographic resource” (Obeyesekere 1998:65). To do so, he assessed the reliability of the authorities used by Clunie, one of which was William Endicott.

William Endicott

Endicott’s narrative recaps his time in Fiji from 1829-1832, during which he was the third mate of a ship called the *Glide*. His journal, *Wrecked Among Cannibals in the Fijis*, included an appendix entitled ‘A Cannibal Feast in the Fiji Islands by an Eye-Witness.’ It is this second portion of the journal that Clunie, Sahlins, and others have used as proof of the existence of Fijian cannibalism. In his critique, Obeyesekere provides a thorough review of Endicott’s account of the cannibal feast he witnessed, which occurred sometime during March 1831 in the northern region of the island of Venua Levu. Upon finishing his overview of the account, Obeyesekere admits that the narrative does present itself as a firsthand account. Especially convincing, he notes, was the description of small details, such as the portion of the victim designated for the king’s consumption. For these reasons, he says it is unsurprising that Clunie and other anthropologists used such accounts to substantiate their analyses of Fijian cannibalism.

That being said, he begins his critique of the narrative’s validity by pointing out the aspects that should have inspired doubt in the anthropologists’ minds. First, “the savage

picking the brains seems to contradict the Fijian revulsion for the head” (Obeyesekere 1998:69). Here, Obeyesekere is commenting on the fact that the anthropologists seemingly failed to consider the cultural validity of the account. Next, he referenced an aspect of the account where Endicott asked his Captain for permission to leave the ship: “If Captain Archer cautioned Endicott when he gave him permission to witness the cannibal feast, it is odd that he did not recommend him going there with a comrade or two; or that Endicott himself did not think of it” (Obeyesekere 1998:69). Here, Obeyesekere is suggesting that a basic level of common sense is missing in this aspect of the narrative, which should have spurred the anthropologists to question its accuracy. Finally, he notes the “extreme ‘accuracy’ of the description of the king’s portion should have sounded too good to be true,” (Obeyesekere 1998:69) a statement supplemented by an endnote that referenced Endicott’s physical location during the ceremony, making it “doubtful that he could have had a close-up and uninterrupted view of the details of the ‘butchering’ from his vantage point” (Obeyesekere 1998:265). With this, Obeyesekere demonstrates a simple logistical flaw in the narrative, which casts substantial doubt on the account. Each of these points, he argues, should have generated suspicion when subject to the review a scholar conducts of a source before using it. Obeyesekere reinforces the point that rather than submitting the account to a basic test to see if it was in accordance with fundamental aspects of Fijian cultural knowledge, common sense, and logistics, scholars unquestioningly trusted the account’s truthfulness.

Obeyesekere continues to address the contradictory aspects of the account that would require a more rigorous examination to discover. By comparing the cannibal feast narrative (written in the appendix) and the journal account (written in *Wrecked Among Cannibals*), he

is able to use “Endicott’s own evidence to show that he could not possibly have witnessed this particular cannibal feast” (Obeyesekere 1998:69). To begin, he overviews how the *journal* describes the nature of interactions and conflicts the crew had with natives during their voyage:

They had to move from place to place owing to conflict with the native population. In one instance, in Ovalau, men engaged in cutting anchor stocks, presumably without permission, were set upon by the natives who killed two sailors. They took their muskets and stripped them of their clothes but, for some strange reason, did not eat them. [Obeyesekere 1998:69]

The following month, on January 1, 1831, the crew engaged in another conflict with the natives. Another occurrence took place in March, where Endicott proclaims the crew was stripped by a party of mountaineers before being taken in by a local king. Although the absence of cannibalism in these instances cannot be proof of its non-existence, I believe it is notable that none of the conflicts suggested cannibalistic practices by the natives.

Additionally, Obeyesekere observes a blatant discrepancy concerning the feast in the *journal* that does not match with the account in the *narrative*:

The king invited Endicott and his fellow sailors to witness the payment of tribute to him by local chiefs... This is the same king who plays such a crucial role in the cannibal narrative. Endicott gives a fine description of the festivities associated with this event, the striking feature of which was the absence of the cannibal feast expectable on such occasions [Obeyesekere 1998:69-70].

Not only is the feast not mentioned here, during the instance where it might make sense, but it is also not mentioned in Endicott’s original log. His log, which is likely the source of information for his book, still exists. There is no reference in it, however, of witnessing any sort of cannibal feast.

Further, he addresses the timeline of the original *journal* compared to the cannibal feast *narrative*. In the journal, Endicott reports that following the conflict in January,

nothing particularly significant occurred until March 22nd when a hurricane destroyed the *Glide*. On the 28th, the Captain left briefly to get help from another European ship stationed on the island. It was during this time that the king invited the crew to witness the tribute.

When matched for comparison:

In his journal, Endicott shows a predilection for exact dates; yet his cannibal narrative is vaguely set ‘in the month of March, 1831’. The internal evidence of this narrative suggests that he, along with others, was working hard during the forenoon, loading the ship and doing other tasks. It was impossible for him to perform these tasks after 22 March when the ship was wrecked. And look at what he says in his *journal* for the period prior to that date: ‘we continued to fish and nothing particular happened until the 22nd March, 1831.’ It is hard to believe that witnessing a cannibal feast was of no particular significance. After 28 March, he could not have witnessed the feast because Archer was not around for him to get permission. This leaves us the period 22 March, the day of the shipwreck, until the 28th, the day of Captain Archer’s departure. But this is not likely, since there was no ship for loading beche-le-mer (which is what he claims in his cannibal narrative); and the natives were hostile (contrary to his account). [Obeyesekere 1998:70]

Thus, Obeyesekere demonstrates that a side-by-side comparison of the timeline laid out in the original *journal* and the alleged cannibal feast *narrative* eliminates all possibility that the account is true.

SAILORS YARNS

As was mentioned at the beginning to this chapter, such accounts are, in fact, classified in a different literature category altogether. They fit within the category of fantasy. Obeyesekere concludes his review and critique of Endicott’s narrative confirming his original objective to denunciate conventional cannibal tales and proposing an alternative theory for the account:

It is therefore virtually certain that Endicott fabricated his eye-witness account thirteen years later to meet the European demand for savage cannibalism, perhaps provoked by the emerging literature on the subject. What else but cannibalism could one expect to find in the Cannibal Islands? [Obeyesekere 1998:70]

Obeyesekere explains that Endicott's writing demonstrates two kinds of text. The journal is in the tradition of shipboard journalism, "and, though Endicott is not a sophisticated journalist, he gives a fairly straightforward account of his experiences" (Obeyesekere 1998:70-71). The narrative of the cannibal feast, however, is in the genre of sailors' yarns.

The concept of sailors' yarns originated from the shipboard habit of sailors recounting stories of their adventures in order to pass the time while performing the tedious task of spinning (or yarning) old rope. Stories that fall into this category are known to blur the lines between truth and fantasy, designed to entertain the audience by taking them for a ride. Obeyesekere described the process by which shipboard journalism came to be replaced by yarns:

The fictional account that replaced the shipboard journals occurred at an important historical moment. The era of shipboard journalism was coming to an end... The islands of the South Seas were already well chartered by the middle of the nineteenth century, and everywhere there were settlements of white missionaries and traders. The kind of ethnographic knowledge that sea captains could bring home was no longer significant; the missionaries and settler whites knew, or ought to know, more about native customs and manners. [Obeyesekere 1998:82]

This process helps us contextualize the difference between these yarning narratives and those that fall under the category of shipboard journalism.¹⁹ Among those that we are considering for this study, "in the South Seas these yarns deal with the purported first hand experiences of the protagonist, generally with his adventures among the natives and witnessing that quintessential attribute of savagery, the cannibal feast" (Obeyesekere 1998:71). Replacing the seemingly more fact-based shipboard journalism, which was quietly influenced by preconceptions and theories, sailors' yarns largely made no effort to hide their basis in fiction.

¹⁹ Shipboard journalism is discussed, and questioned (Part III, Ch.2)

Obeyesekere points out how Endicott himself “sketches a plausible context for inventing this account” (Obeyesekere 1998:71) in the beginning of his essay. The description Obeyesekere refers to reads:

After working hard in the afternoons, his comrades had time to spare and indulged themselves in ‘reveries and yarns’ and ‘in a sailor’s privilege of telling tales, singing songs and reflecting upon “better days gone by”’. While speaking of these, he also mentions a raconteur, an American named David Whippy who... could narrate ‘many a long tale of the manners and customs of natives, and especially of their cannibalism’ (Endicott 1923:56). [Obeyesekere 1998:71]

Here, Endicott illustrates the scene that yarns were typically born out of. Plagued by boredom, the sailors passed the time by yarning to each other. This introduction could imply that the following tale was produced in this setting. Further, a statement Endicott makes to conclude the narrative provides even more evidence for this:

Endicott himself, in true yarnster fashion, has a wonderfully ironic and deliberately give-away line at the end of his essay: ‘I am about to the end of my yarn, yet I might lengthen it by knotting on other strands, but my timepiece reminds me that it is past midnight; so I shall take the liberty to belay this and turn in’ (Endicott 1923:70). [Obeyesekere 1998:71]

The language Endicott uses here refers back to the origin of spinning rope, called a yarn. This language is, however, employed cleverly to blur the double meaning his statement could have.

Cannibal Jack

There is a technique to spinning a yarn, which involves making the fantastic seem to be fact. This technique is illustrated through the cannibal narratives of John Jackson, who was an interpreter on a voyage to New Caledonia in 1851. Although he was not the ship’s journalist, Jackson wrote in the style of shipboard journalism to produce the account known as ‘Jackson’s Narrative.’ This account needs to be read alongside another book he wrote for publication, *Cannibal Jack*, which was written in 1889 when Jackson was in his seventies.

In the examples Obeyesekere considered, the yarns “incorporate well-known ethnographic truths which then are turned inside and out and woven into an episode in a story” (Obeyesekere 1998:82). Known details about a culture are worked into the narrative, making it hard for the reader to determine whether they are hearing fact or fiction. An example of this process from *Cannibal Jack*, is described as follows:

It is a well-known ethnographic fact, true or otherwise, that when a high Fijian chief dies his wives are strangled and buried with him. This is put to good use by Jackson when, in the Western narrative mode, he saves the Rotuma beauty from strangulation and this in turn provides the dynamo that pushes the narrative forward. [Obeyesekere 1998:83]

The story employs an ethnographic “fact” which earns it authority among contemporary anthropologists. But such comparative work as Obeyesekere conducted with Endicott’s tales demonstrates that the yarning process amplifies and exaggerates the “fact,” so anthropologists unknowingly use imagined data. This process, from yarn to ethnography, is illustrated through Clunie’s (1777) application of Jackson’s narratives:

The relationship between the fiction of ethnography and the ethnography in the fiction can be quite complicated... Take Clunie’s example of the ‘custom of hanging the enemy sexual organs in the sacred trees’ (Clunie 1977:39). Lieutenant Pollard, visiting Bau in 1850, noted a building to house visitors; behind this was a tree in which were hung ‘several scraps of skin like scalps, but from another part of the body’ (Erskine 1967:294). Even if Pollard’s is a valid empirical observation and he is correct in coyly hinting that the ‘scraps of skin’ were from dead men’s genitals, very little ethnographic insight could be gleaned from this description. However, Clunie’s primary ethnographic source is not Pollard but Jackson’s vivid description of what one might call the ‘genital tree’ of fantasy... ‘Certain nameless parts of the bodies were taken care of to furnish the “akau tabu” (forbidden tree) with a new supply of fruit, which was already artificially prolific in fruit, both of the masculine and feminine gender” (Jackson 1967:473; Clunie 1977:39). [Obeyesekere 1998:84]

Thus, enough involvement of “known” cultural practices masks the level of fiction in such stories, encouraging anthropologists to accept the account as truth. To draw attention back to

the point I proposed at the beginning of this chapter, when ethnographers use fantastic accounts to support their work, the work they produce is ethnographic fantasy.

4. Sources of Evidence Concluded

What we can take away from this reevaluation of common sources of evidence that are seen to prove institutionalized cannibalism is the necessity for awareness on the part of the reader. With a stronger awareness of the biases and fictions that may exist behind such reports, we can be more critical in accepting sources that are believed to demonstrate proof of institutionalized cannibalism. Obeyesekere proposes:

A crucial theory for this region must entail a rewriting of the Polynesian ethnography invented in the nineteenth century and after. It requires more than a scholarly deconstruction of traditional ethnographic writing. It forces us to explore the deeper question of the relation between the anthropological identity and the reality of cannibalism, at least in the period under review. [Obeyesekere 1998:86-86]

We must acknowledge the role of the discourse on cannibalism in production of these sources of evidence. The themes of shipboard journalism and sailors yarns are dictated by the discourse on cannibalism rather than the practice of cannibalism. What such sources produce is more in line with European fantasies than any ethnographic reality.

Part IV: Impact of Obsession on Western Studies of Cannibalism

Just as the various factors of the Cannibal Complex, created through the Western discourse on cannibalism, influenced sources of evidence on the topic, they have also had a considerable impact on Western practices of ethnological science. With this in mind, we must consider the possibility that the Cannibal Complex and the Western discourse played a notable role in guiding the direction and eventual conclusions of cannibal studies.

An effective study of cannibalism would separate the popular image of cannibalism that fuels the Cannibal Complex from the realities of its practice. Ideally, the anthropologist would be able to take on such a task with ease, invulnerable to the influence of subjectivity. Contrary to our expectations of the ideal anthropologist, however, the Western obsession and popular viewpoint are likely to have affected anthropologists' understandings and attempts to broach the subject. This is not due to any flaw in the anthropologists' competency, but to the expansive influence the obsession commands in dictating the dialogue of the topic.²⁰ Arens (1998) discussed this point, stating that anthropologists "have been equally deluded by a Western meta-myth... [which] suggests that those involved, including scholars, are susceptible to the same mundane prejudices and imagery as those they are engaged to instruct" (Arens 1998:45). The primary channel through which the obsession's influence gained access to anthropological studies of cannibalism is the original evidence and analyses. For this reason, it is important to keep in mind that,

²⁰ The influence the obsession has over anthropologists by controlling the dialogue on cannibalism was discussed (Part II, Ch.5)

Although these ‘more serious’ researchers may have been less biased and more objective than lay writers, they often relied heavily on information provided by the general public, pastoralists, local officials, missionaries, journalists, and others. Thus, although their works may have been more serious scholarly endeavors, the data upon which some of their interpretations were based are sometimes suspect. [Pickering 1999:65]

Consequently, potentially polluted evidence is perceived to be reliable by anthropologists and may be used to produce unsubstantiated conclusions that support the Cannibal Complex: “indigenous myths and legends having been conveyed as facts by a discipline dependent on the exotic other—which has to be created, at least in part, by anthropology itself” (Arens 1998:42). The authority that the anthropologist provides lends the conclusions the credibility necessary to sustain the original myth.

Thus, we must consider how slanted our *Western representation* of cannibalism might be. As Obeyesekere explained it, “cannibalism must be seen as a European projection of the Other” (Obeyesekere 2005:2). To do so, we must reevaluate how cannibalism has been studied within anthropology, and reinterpret the aspects of cannibalism studies that are most subject to the influences of Western interpretation. In doing this, we must keep in mind the features that form the Western obsession. The first step is considering the possibility of cannibalism having been falsely attributed to societies and the mechanisms by which this can occur. Next is a discussion of the various forms of mistranslation that are likely to occur in discussions that can lead to a confirmation of cannibalism within a society. Finally, we will apply what we discovered about sources of evidence in Part III and IV to one case study in order to see how they manifest in a common cannibal narrative.

1. False Attribution

The first step we must take in reexamining preexisting studies of institutionalized cannibalism is to consider the possibility of cannibalism having been, in some cases, falsely attributed to a society. By this, I mean there are cases where anthropologists and other scholars studying cannibalism may have found signs that seemed to support the practice in societies where it may not, in fact, have existed: in other words, the evidence and conclusion about the existence of cannibalism does not hold up when viewed in the larger cultural framework. This illustrates what has been described as the “imperfections in the anthropological record... [where] false theories are often built upon imperfect bases of induction” (Garson & Read 1892:vi). This can happen by misuse of unsupported general theories, interpretation of informant judgments as fact, or various forms of cultural mistranslation. It is because of the weight of factors like these that can lead to false attributions that Tuzin & Brown noted in introducing their studies on cannibalism: “the present collection of essays grew out of the editor’s conviction that a good deal of this global theorizing, although stimulating and doubtless worthwhile in its own right, is decidedly premature; that despite their lengthy awareness of such customs... anthropologists are notably uninformed about cannibalistic ideas and practices in specific cultural settings” (Brown & Tuzin 1983:3).

MISAPPLIED THEORIES

One key way by which cannibalism can be attributed out of the context of a given society is the application of general theories, which, upon closer examination, have no relevance to the society in question. An example of this is evident in a cross-cultural examination Sanday conducts to test the hypothesis proposed by Eli Sagan in his 1974

publication, *Cannibalism: Human Aggression and Cultural Form*. In an attempt to demonstrate that “cannibalism is not a unitary phenomenon but varies with respect to both cultural meaning and cultural content,” (Sanday 1986:3), Sanday endeavored to systematically consider Sagan’s hypothesis:

Sagan contends that cannibalism “is the elementary form of institutionalized aggression” (Sagan 1974:109). 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 incorporation literally. He eats the person who, by dying, has abandoned him” (Sagan 1974:28). [Sanday 1986:10-11]

Sanday breaks down the essential elements of Sagan’s hypothesis and presents her approach:²¹

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... [Sanday 1986:11]

The first variable she considers is the society’s level of political complexity. This examination reveals that of the societies with reported cannibalism, 25 (out of 37) “are politically homogenous, meaning that the highest level of jural authority is the local community. Thus, cannibalism is more likely to be present in politically homogenous than heterogeneous societies” (Sanday 1986:11). She continues, however, to direct focus towards

²¹ Her cross-cultural examination is based on a sample of 156 societies drawn from the Human Relations Area Files, which she “employed in an earlier study of female power and dominance. This group offers scholars a representative sample of the world’s known and best-described societies,” (Sanday 1986:4) ranging in time periods from 1750 B.C. to the 1960s. She then narrowed the original sample down to the 109 that had sufficient information for her to judge whether or not institutionalized cannibalism could be present in the society. Of these, one-third (37 societies) had evidence that indicated the presence of institutionalized cannibalism, and the remaining two-thirds (72 societies) indicated its absence.

the rest of the comparison to explain that this information is not sufficient to support Sagan's hypothesis that cannibalism is a primitive form of aggression. The 25 societies that had evidence of cannibalism only made up 44% of the total sample; more than half (56%) of the total number of societies with no political sovereignty above local community do not practice cannibalism. Thus, she concludes, "the most that can be said from the information... is that cannibalism is more likely to be found in the simpler societies" (Sanday 1986:12).

Another variable she considers is the relationship between food stress and cannibalism. This comparison reveals that the relationship between cannibalism and food stress is significant, as "most (29, or 91%) of the societies for which there are reports of cannibalism experience occasional hunger or famine or protein deficiency" (Sanday 1986:14). While this demonstrates an association between hunger and cannibal practices, it does not support the conclusion that hunger creates the practice of cannibalism. Looking at the rest of the comparison, it is clear that most (43, or 60%) of the societies for which there is *no evidence* of cannibalism experience occasional hunger or famine or protein deficiency, as well. Thus, hunger is equally as likely to be present in societies that do and do not practice cannibalism.

For our purposes, these comparisons are relevant because they reveal potential situations where a theory, could lead to false attributions of the practice because association does not prove causation. Considering only the first finding that the variable of political complexity reveals—that cannibalism is more likely to be present in politically homogenous societies—it is easy to imagine how one might extend the theory to conclude that politically homogenous societies are likely to practice cannibalism. The second finding that this

variable reveals, however, presents a larger context of comparison, which shows that politically homogenous societies are not characterized by cannibal practices, although cannibal practices are more likely to exist within them. Similarly, for the hunger variable, Sanday explains,

The fact that hunger is just as likely to be present in societies that do not practice cannibalism demonstrates [the] 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. [Sanday 1986:8]

Thus, we must recognize the possibility of cannibalism being attributed to a society through the misapplication of general theories. While a theory may explain the case of a particular society when studied within its own holistic content, the larger cross-cultural analysis revealed that when the theory is put up against a more expansive cross-cultural comparison, the resulting analysis is much less clear-cut. Thus, following Sanday's suggestion, "we must look to culture to understand the constitution of cannibal practice" (Sanday 1986:14).

INFORMANT JUDGMENTS

A second occurrence that can lead to false accounts of cannibalism is misleading information given by local informants. The most significant source of false information is the practice of "othering."²² To reiterate, "othering" is the common practice that attributes to outsiders, specifically to those who are feared and distrusted, some general condition of barbaric or disgusting conduct; "the belief that outsiders are cannibals appears to be an unconscious but effective mechanism for maintaining self-identity, social superiority, and 'humanness' at the cost of the identity, social-status, and 'humanness' of aliens" (Pickering 1999:54). "Othering" occurs across cultures to achieve the same goal. This aligns with

²² The practice of "othering" was discussed (Part II, Ch. 1)

Arens' attempts to draw attention to "the anthropological repetition of slurs by one ethnic group against the other" (Arens 1998:42). With this in mind, we must consider the nature of information acquired through local testimony, especially from members of a neighboring community to the peoples in question.

In one scenario, a local informant's claim that a nearby group engages in cannibalism could be accurate. The accused group's cannibalism may be common knowledge among the informant's community as a product of direct experience; members of the informant's community could have first-hand knowledge of the group's cannibal practices through having directly witnessed it, for example. In this case, the informant would have provided the research with concrete, credible confirmation of cannibalism for a group in which cannibalism is practiced.

Conversely, however, is another scenario, which involves local informants whose community has employed the process of "othering" against a neighboring society. In this scenario, it is possible for a local informant to provide researchers with affirmations of cannibalism for societies where it may not, in fact, exist. Pickering (1999) describes multiple instances of such reporting among various Aboriginal peoples:

Keppel (1853 [2]:155), for example, wrote, "One of the tribes, distant from Port Essington about sixty miles, is said to be composed of very bad men, cannibals; they are very much afraid of them." Helms (1893:282) similarly wrote that his informant "asserts that his tribe never practiced cannibalism... But he tells me that the Bardocks up to quite recent times indulged in this terrible practice," while Dahl (1926:93) recounts: "I very often asked the blacks if they practiced the eating of human flesh. They answered almost invariably that they did not do it themselves but the neighboring tribes did it." Bates (e.g., 1928,1932) drew most of her evidence for cannibalism from the accusations of one group toward another, usually in unconventional meetings at missions or ration stations. Meggitt (1962:36) describes Warlpiri distrust of distant neighbors in that "... most Warlpiri are convinced that these people, in their own countries, make a practice of killing strangers and eating their kidney fat." [Pickering 1999:56]

These accounts are particularly strong evidence of “othering” because, as Pickering notes, “they are *always* derogatory, the Aboriginal informants seeing the presumed cannibalistic habits of aliens as ‘wrong’ behavior” (Pickering 1999:56). It is important to note that the informant may not be intentionally misinforming the observer. Rather, considering the effectiveness of the othering process, the informant likely fully believes that the accused group engages in cannibalism. In this scenario, as in the previous scenario, the observer would assume the report to be the product of the informant’s direct experience. Although it may not be an intentional falsehood, however, “accounts of members of one group accusing members of another group as being cannibals may not reflect experiential reality” (Pickering 1999:56).

Gardner (1999) provides a direct example of Western observers adopting a particular view of a supposed cannibalistic society based on information provided by neighboring communities. He introduces his discussion of Mianmin cannibalism by explaining: “They have had a reputation for outstanding ‘savagery’ ever since Europeans first encountered them. This reputation, though, was partly produced by the intercourse between Europeans and the Mianmin’s neighbors, which took place before any direct contact between these newcomers and the Mianmin...” (Gardner 1999:29). The image that Europeans had of the Mianmin and their cannibal practices, then, was not formed through direct interaction or observation. Rather, it was formed through outside opinions, and was thus completely subjective.

2. Mistranslation

The next step in reexamining preexisting studies of cannibalism within specific societies is to consider the various forms of mistranslation that can occur when informants admit to practicing cannibalism. These mistranslations can be linguistic, communicative, or cultural, where misunderstanding occurs because of a lack of understanding of the cultural context and ideology. The likelihood of such mistranslations occurring is increased by the problem that modern anthropology found with the early sources on cannibalism.²³ Due to the nature and sources of early reports, their accuracy and objectivity were questionable. Further, the reporters largely ignored the social and cultural contexts in which ritual cannibalism occurred. Mistranslation is accurately described by Pickering, who states: “There is no reason to doubt that most colonial recorders of these accounts provided close-to-literal reproductions of what they were told. There is, however, reason to suspect that the relationships between what was said, what was meant, and what actually happened, were considerably different” (Pickering 1999:55). Additionally, these colonial recorders did not – or perhaps could not – make efforts to corroborate the reports.

LINGUISTIC

Instances of linguistic mistranslation can occur both through complications in literal translation as well as through translating metaphors. In terms of the former, even with a strong understanding of how to speak a local language, the reality that many verbs have multiple meanings is of specific concern. The likelihood of this complication arising is magnified by the fact that “there are innumerable figurative or metaphoric usages parasitic

²³ The problems contemporary anthropologists have found with early sources of cannibalism were discussed (Part I, Ch.1)

on the ingestive sense of ‘eat’ in most languages” (Goldman 1999:20). A failure to recognize the multiple ways in which the verb “to eat” can appear in a conversation most definitely could lead to an incorrect interpretation of the speaker’s meaning. As an example:

In Huli (Papua New Guinea) the same verb, “eat” [*na*], occurs in constructions that mean “to cover distances rapidly,” “to win or beat someone else,” “to have sexual intercourse,” or “to be consumed by pain.” [Goldman 1999:20-21]

A more detailed look into the metaphorical concern of language translation is found in Pickering (1999), which focuses on the importance of metaphor in Aboriginal communications. He notes that there are an assortment of common metaphors, many of which could be misconstrued as evidence of cannibalistic practices:

Roheim (1974:245), for example, noted that central desert groups used the metaphor “have you eaten” to mean “have you had sex,” with girls being described as “unripe” or “cooked” as a measure of their sexual availability. Tonkinson (1978:74) describes an action during initiation in which the young boy, having swallowed his own foreskin is told that “...he has eaten his own boy...” Rose (1984:194-195), writing of the Victoria River district of northern Australia, describes a ceremony called “...‘cooking the baby’ which is performed from one to three times for newborn infants, both male and female...” in which the baby is rubbed with a slurry of ant bed and water. This contributes toward the bestowal of rights to a child’s mother’s country. Rose describes people asserting ties to their mothers and mothers’ mothers’ country by referring to themselves as “cooked” in that country. The 1983 transcript of the Murrniji Land Claim in the Northern Territory independently records one claimant, in describing this ceremony, as saying, “Get that baby, cook him” (Aboriginal Land Commissioner 1983:75-76). [Pickering 1999:57]

Thus, there is a clear possibility for metaphor to be confused with literal description, especially when prevailing views about “primitive” peoples includes notions that they are uncivilized or barbaric, which we must acknowledge when considering admissions of cannibalism. Knowing the meaning and context of a metaphor used in “admissions” of cannibalism can, in fact, describe different activities entirely. For, even with solid proficiency, it can be difficult to identify the deeper meanings and metaphors hidden within a language.

COMMUNICATIVE

Communication mistranslation is further demonstrated when considering instances of initial contact where there was no shared language, as was the case with the voyages of early British explorers. Obeyesekere's (1992) discussion of Wallis' expedition of 1767, the first British contact with the Tahitians, is an example of such an instance. Obeyesekere uses this example to describe the "language of gestures," which, "was the sole means of communication during first contact with peoples whose language the British did not understand" (Obeyesekere 1992:648). Quoting Reinhold Forster's account of gestural discourse on cannibalism in Tanna, New Hebrides:

It seems that the Islanders eat the people, whom they kill in battle, for they pointed to y^e Arms, Legs, Thighs etc & and shewed how they roasted & devoured the Meat of them. They showed all this by signs... They were very eager to undeceive us, and showed, by signs, how they killed a man, cut his limbs asunder, and separated the flesh from bones. Lastly, they bit their own arms, to express more clearly that they eat human flesh." [RJ, 5:595 quoted in Obeyesekere 1992:648]

Of this account, Obeyesekere claims, "...this response of the people of Tanna was surely not initiated by them: it is a response to the British inquiry on cannibalism. The British must express themselves exactly as the natives did, that is, 'bit their own arms,' and so on, since they did not know the native language at all... it is... clear that the native reaction is a pantomimic response to the British language of gestures" (Obeyesekere 1992:648).

This is only one example of a general communicative mistranslation, and I must admit, it is not a very strong example. We cannot say with any degree of confidence that the "language of gestures" was dictated by the British and only mimicked by the natives, or that the natives were not fully aware of what their gestures implied. I reference this example, however, to demonstrate the larger point of complication in initial communication. Without any shared language, it is clear how barriers to communication could lead to communicative

mistranslations, which we must keep in mind when considering evidence based in native admissions of practicing cannibalism.

CULTURAL

Instances of cultural mistranslation are most easily understood through occasions where incorrect interpretations of local customs were perceived to be evidence of cannibalism in a given society. This aligns with Arens' attempt to draw attention to "indigenous myths and legends having been conveyed as facts by a discipline dependent on the exotic other" (Arens 1998:42). In such instances, a failure to "relate what is being said against the backcloth of real and unreal worlds muddied the understanding of cannibalism in pre- and postcolonial histories" (Goldman 1999:4). For this reason, we must take care to compare observations against the general function of the society.

Pickering's (1999) critique of the persistent attribution of cannibalism to Australian aborigines demonstrates how local customs can be misinterpreted as evidence of cannibalism. He begins by explaining that the most common type of firsthand account of cannibalism by Europeans is "those where some fragment of behavior, or some material evidence, is observed and presumed to have been part of a cannibal act" (Pickering 1999:60). He provides a general outline of such behaviors and evidences:

These reports typically describe some human remains in an unusual state or context, such as broken, burnt, or in a fire (Bates 1928; Dalrymple 1874; Forrest 1876:314; Gregory & Gregory 1884; Jardine & Jardine 1867:183; Meston 1924; Palmerstone 1883; Petrie 1904; Searcy 1912:164); the observation of Aborigines eating or handling what was presumed to be human flesh (Campbell 1847:249; Murray 1898:4); the observation of identifiably human remains in the possession of an Aboriginal (Byrne 1848 [2]:278; Le Souef 1878:296; Searcy 1909:193); or the observation of unusual mortuary rites that, it was presumed, would eventually lead to a cannibal conclusion that was never actually observed (McDonald 1872, 1873). [Pickering 1999:60]

These accounts, however, raise the question of “whether the observation of suspected human remains is conclusive evidence of a past or intended cannibal act” (Pickering 1999:60). There are a range of examples in which Westerners believed they observed instances of cannibalism, only to find out that they were mistaken. During their 1777 voyage, Captain Cook and his crew encountered the set of Polynesian Islands known as Aitutaki, where they saw what they thought was human flesh cooking in an earth oven. Cook’s men were fully confident that what they were observing was the preparation of human flesh for consumption, and fully convinced that the natives would soon eat the Europeans as well. In the end, however, it was revealed that the meat being cooked was, in fact, hog, not human (Obeyesekere 1992:635). Their observations led to definite conclusions, but it turns out their observations were incorrect.

Considering observed behaviors and material evidence that cannot be definitively unassociated with cannibal activities, cannibalism is a possible explanation for such observations. Often, however, a stronger understanding of the culture in question provides other, better fitting possibilities. In the case of the Aborigines, Pickering explains that it is Aboriginal custom to carry body parts either as charms or keepsakes, or as part of the mourning process (Howitt 1904:459-460). Further, various methods of ritual cooking, dismemberment, defleshing, and bone breaking, are found to be aspects of mortuary practices (Basedow 1935:230; Berndt & Berndt 1977:465; Davidson 1948:78-79; Maddock 1982; McDonald 1872:218; McKenzie 1980; Meehan 1971; Peterson 1976:107; Pickering 1989; Roth 1907:402). These examples demonstrate how aspects of traditions that are completely unrelated to cannibalism could, and have often been, mistaken as physical proof of human flesh eating.

Pickering (1999) explains that often, people admit to participating in cannibal activities or admit to it on behalf of their direct ancestors. In these instances:

Such accounts cannot be dismissed as fabrications, but neither can they be unquestioningly accepted as reflecting experiential reality. Acceptance of these accounts is complicated by phenomena characteristic of... societies—in particular, the significance of cannibalism in myth... [and] belief in the reality of cannibalism through metaphysical experience. [Pickering 1999:56]

Thus, a more complex demonstration of cultural mistranslation appears when observers do not understand a specific culture's construction of the individual in relation to ancestors, myth, or metaphysical experience.

Individual in Relation to Ancestors

Discussing cannibalism in Asmat history, Hoffman (2014) alluded to the Asmat cultural understandings of the self, which demonstrates an instance where interpretations can be complicated by misunderstanding such a concept. While listening to his informants describe an event that took place many years previous, he observed,

What happened to one man in the *jeu*²⁴ happened to them all. There was no separation. No individuality. No I. Collective guilt ran deep in a place where men took certain other men as lovers/brothers and also sometimes shared each other's wives, where everyone was related and the *bisj* pole carvings were a tangle of men standing on and connected to other men. [Hoffman 2014:133]

While Hoffman does not say so specifically, since he was not considering the topic directly, this description of Asmat identity could demonstrate the risk of cultural mistranslation leading to false cannibalism attributions. Hoffman often expected that his informants would be eager to answer his sensitive questions about the secret details of their culture's cannibalistic practices. He compared Asmat to Americans, stating, “in America people's

²⁴ *Jeu* are men's houses, which constitute the heart of every village. Each village has at least one *jeu*, and it is within the building that all major decisions are made and all celebrations take place. *Jeu* units make up different units of the village, and *jeu* units are typically divided by conflict (frequently involving killing).

egos get the best of them: they like to talk about what they've done..." the information he wanted from them concerned "events that took place fifty years ago, that involved their fathers and grandfathers, not themselves. I imagined those events would be less immediate, less dangerous" (Hoffman 2014:134). However, considering the Asmat conception of the self as indistinguishable from the group, it is possible that his informants kept silent due to their ties to their fathers and grandfathers. Because of the "collective guilt" they share, admission on behalf of a father or grandfather would be the equivalent of personal admission, even if the informant had never physically consumed human flesh. Thus, in such a context, if an observer does not understand that the individual is inseparable from the group, they could falsely conclude that an informant's admission of cannibalism reflected an experiential reality, when, in fact, it reflected the actions of a relative.

Individual in Relation to Myth

The Aboriginal perception of the self as related to mythological ancestors demonstrates another instance where interpretations could be inapplicable with an incorrect understanding. Aborigines perceive their mythological ancestors to be their own direct ancestors, and the actions of these ancestors are perceived as real events. In their cultural myths,²⁵ these ancestors often engaged in cannibalistic activities. Through this direct connection, such circumstances could lead an informant to state: "We aren't cannibals now, but we used to be," which was a statement I myself heard often during my time in Fiji. Pickering warns, "this interpretation of myth as history by informants is compounded by European reporters similarly interpreting myth as being rooted in historical events outside living memory (Hiatt 1975:13-14; Spencer & Gillen 1899:475, 1927:365-366), effectively

²⁵ The discussion of cultural myths was introduced (Part I, Ch:3)

transubstantiating the symbolic into the material” (Pickering 1999:57). The line of mistranslation here is clear.

Thus, an observer who lacks an understanding of this perceived relation between the people and their mythical ancestors would, again, be at great risk of concluding that an informant’s admission of cannibalism reflected an experiential reality, when in actuality it reflects the events of the culture’s mythology.

The Huli of the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea illustrate another example of such an opportunity for misunderstanding to arise in the context of the perceived reality of myth. As part of their tradition, the Huli believe they occupy land that had once been occupied by a giant race of cannibal ogres called *Baya Horo*. The Huli have a system for differentiating the fact and the fiction of such tales:

In their oral traditions of *Baya Horo*, the Huli discriminate between the cycle of tales that are understood as faithful renditions of historical fact... and a set of fictional tales, incidents, and characters that are appreciated as nonhistorical in nature. In performance the two forms are frequently mixed; audiences discriminate how they are to understand information by reference to familiar story elements and text signals. [Goldman 1999:7]

For a non-local observer, however, the ability to discriminate between what is known to be fact and what is known to be fiction would likely not be an easy task. There is a high chance that mention of *Baya Horo* cannibalism would be misunderstood as definite fact of its historic practice.

Individual in Relation to Metaphysical Experience

Finally, a construction of the individual in relation to the metaphysical experience that could complicate an observer’s understanding of cannibal realities is illustrated again through the Aborigines. In their view, what occurs while a person is dreaming or in a trance is understood as a real event experienced by the person’s spirit. Pickering refers to several

examples of this, relating to cannibalism: “Sorcerers traveled ‘out of body’ to extract and consume the kidney fat of a victim. ‘Victims’ dreamed that they had been cannibalized by sorcerers. Evil spirits were cannibals, waiting to prey on the living” (Pickering 1999:57). Thus, faced with such a context, if an observer does not understand that metaphysical experiences are considered to be real experiences, they could falsely conclude that an informant’s admission of cannibalism reflected an experiential reality, when it actually reflected experiences that occurred during a dream or trance.

3. Case Application

In reviewing how the discourse on cannibalism has influenced sources of evidence for cannibalism and anthropological studies of the practice, we have considered a range of examples. We have reviewed the array of flaws that can exist within commonly trusted sources of evidence,²⁶ the preconceptions that influenced shipboard journalism,²⁷ the fictional reality of sailors’ yarns,²⁸ the ways cannibalism can be falsely attributed,²⁹ and prospects for mistranslation.³⁰ We can now apply what we discovered to one case study in order to see how they manifest in a common cannibal narrative.

Having sparked the beginning of the discourse on cannibalism, Hulme (1998) identified the account of Dr. Diego Alvarez Chanca as the earliest modern account of cannibalism. Chanca was a medical doctor who sailed with Columbus on his second voyage

²⁶ Issues with evidence were discussed (Part III, Ch.1)

²⁷ Preconceptions that motivated methods and reports of shipboard journalism were discussed (Part III, Ch.2)

²⁸ The genre of sailors’ yarns were discussed (Part III, Ch.3)

²⁹ False attributions of cannibalism were discussed (Part IV, Ch.1)

³⁰ Instances where mistranslations can commonly occur were discussed (Part IV, Ch.2)

to the Caribbean in November 1493. Chanca's account portrays the events that took place on the 4th of that month, which are described as follows:

When we came near, the admiral ordered a light caravel to the coast along looking for a harbor. It went ahead and having reached land, sighted some houses. The captain went ashore in the boat and reached the house, in which he found their inhabitants. As soon as they saw them [our men] they took to flight, and he entered the houses and found the things that they had, for they had taken nothing away, and from there he took two parrots, very large and very different from all those seen before. He found much cotton, spun and ready for spinning, and articles of food; and he brought away a little of everything; especially he brought away four or five bones of the arms and legs of men. When we saw this, we suspected that the islands were those of the Caribe, which are inhabited by people who eat human flesh. (Translated in Hulme and Whitehead 1992:32; Spanish in Gil and Varela 1984:158) [Hulme 1998:16-17]

This is considered to be the first example of what is referred to as the "cannibal scene": "a few bones lying around, and then removed by one of the ship's officers, as mementos perhaps" (Obeyesekere 2005:9). This scene, within this context, is what we will apply our new set of reinterpretation skills to.

First: this account possesses one of the distinct features that we identified for complicating the validity of sources of evidence: Chanca was not present at the scene he described, making his testimony a secondhand account.³¹ Hulme explains the authority the account holds despite this fact, through "Chanca's status as a medical doctor equipping him with the kind of knowledge and approach which supposedly mark him as an appropriate forerunner of the objective historian" (Hulme 1998:17). Second: the account demonstrates the impact of preconceptions,³² as Hulme stresses "Dr. Chanca's testimony, far from being, as sometimes is claimed, a 'matter-of-fact' description, is a highly mediated piece of prose deeply embedded in the assumptions which governed Columbus' second voyage" (Hulme 1998:17). Most importantly, this evidence of cannibalism "can only refer to a collective

³¹ The origin of sources, and firsthand versus secondhand accounts, was discussed (Part III, Ch.1)

³² The impact of preconceptions on reports of cannibalism was discussed (Part III, Ch.2)

view promulgated principally by Columbus himself as source of authority and as main conduit of information and opinion between the first voyage and second” (Hulme 1998:17). Third: in accordance with a common form of cultural mistranslation³³ the presence of “four or five human bones” was considered to be sufficient evidence to confirm “that the islands were those islands of Caribe, which are inhabited by people who eat human flesh.” For contemporary anthropologists, however, this conclusion overlooks the strong possibility that the bones were present as part of the common funerary rituals of the Caribbean.

Finally, the effect of this account illustrates the disturbing outcome of sources that have been retold and embellished.³⁴ Hulme explains that Chanca’s account found its way into the European imagination through its alterations at the hands of Peter Martyr, a scholar who never even visited the Caribbean. Through him, the scene transformed:

To the handful of bones in one hut reported by Chanca, Peter Martyr pluralized the location, gave the houses kitchens, added pieces of human flesh broached on a spit ready for roasting and, for good measure, threw in the head of a young boy hanging from a beam and still soaked in blood. [Hulme 1998:18]

Chanca’s account underwent further transformation following Martyr. It was notably magnified in the 1892 publication celebrating the Columbus quarter-centenary. From this account,

A handful of bones—which might have had nothing to do with cannibalism—has now been transformed into ‘veritable human butcher-shops’, a kind of mass-production line for cannibal delicacies. Martyr’s own addition of a child’s head hanging from the rafters has multiplied. And the inevitable pot makes its appearance, with limbs boiling away. In two easy stages, we move from a secondhand report of a few human bones to ‘several evidences’ that it was ‘manifest’ that cannibalism was ‘a common usage’. [Hulme 1998:19]

The history of Chanca’s account and the transformation it endured, Hulme concludes, “provides evidence of a fascination which requires more analysis than it is usually given”

³³ The variety of forms of cultural mistranslation were discussed (Part IV, Ch.2)

³⁴ The process through which retelling distorts an account was discussed (Part III, Ch.1)

(Hulme 1998:19). In applying some of the lessons we learned through reevaluating common sources of evidence for the practice of cannibalism and anthropological studies of the topic, we were able to conduct a well-rounded review of a source that has been central to studies of institutionalized cannibalism.

Part V: Contact Influence

In examining a topic so deeply embedded in the themes of difference and interpretation, it is easy to forget the effect of contact between two cultures. As a final step in reevaluating studies of cannibalism, it is necessary to consider the influence that contact with other cultures may have had both on Western observers, and on native practices. Hulme explained the emphasis in more recent anthropological work on the area of cultural contact. Used by Mary Louise Pratt in her book *Imperial Eyes*, the term “contact zone” refers to “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations on some kind, even if these are often marked by conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (Hulme 1998:20). Hulme continues to describe how the idea of the contact zone can help clarify the concept of the cannibal by allowing us to...

Conceive of an encounter in which two (or more) cultures inevitably and immediately begin to adapt as a result of the inevitable and immediate dialogue between them—which may not, of course, take place on terms of equality. This perspective—antagonistic to the supposedly objective language of observation and description that marks much colonial discourse—encourages careful attention to the circumstances of cultural exchange in which reports of cannibalism are found. [Hulme 1998:20-21]

Thus, we must consider that for an opportunity for observation of cannibal practices to emerge, a contact zone emerges to allow it. We must consider all exchanges as encounters between two cultures, both of which are affected by the setting established by their interaction.

1. Observation Context

The role of the contact zone and its effects on Western interactions and interpretations is illustrated by the fact that evidence is dependent on opportunities for observation; observers can only record the customs and events they have the chance to observe. For that reason, Obeyesekere ran up against the reality that “there is no account in any of the early texts about pre-contact cannibalism among the Maori or among any other Polynesian group” (Obeyesekere 1992:653). The problem this presents to anthropological evidence, however, is that the presence of an outsider automatically changes the context of the observed behavior, eliminating the possibility of understanding it in its pure state. This is, of course, a criticism that all anthropologists confront during their participant observation work. Contemporary anthropologists, however, are at least aware of the issue, and undergo methods training in an attempt to mitigate the problem. The early explorers who wrote reports were neither self-critical, nor were they trained in ethnography.³⁵ For this reason, we must consider the context created in order for observation to happen.

An example of how the opportunity for observation redefines the context of a cannibalistic event is demonstrated by an event that took place off the coast of New Zealand during Cook’s 1773 voyage, described in Obeyesekere (1992). The event was initiated when some of the officers went ashore to curb their boredom by interacting with the natives. Once on shore, the officers came across the head, heart, and bowels of a youth who had been recently killed. The only information we are given about how the youth died in the first place is when Obeyesekere informs the reader, “the natives of this area had gone up to Admiralty Bay to fight a battle there; this boy’s head was from that battle” (Obeyesekere

³⁵ The lack of self-reflection and sophisticated methodology among early reporters was discussed (Part III, Ch.2)

1992:637). A lieutenant, Richard Pickersgill, purchased the head and brought it on board the ship. Although it is not explicitly stated in Obeyesekere's account, it seems that the reader should assume the crew invited some Maori onto the ship. Of this incident, Cook wrote, "a piece of the flesh had been broiled and eat by one of the Natives in the presince of most of the officers" (Cook 1961:293 quoted in Obeyesekere 1992:637). Taken at face value, this report, straight from Cook's own journals, would be valuable evidence of a blatant instance of cannibalism that was directly witnessed by Cook and his crew.

In reality, however, Cook's report is neither a firsthand account nor is it a pure instance of cannibalism. For one, Cook was not present during the event but returned to the ship after the fact, so he recorded the story as it was told to him. Moreover, Cook's account does not give a full and accurate description of the event. We know this because there is an eyewitness account of the event recorded in the journal of Lieutenant Charles Clerke. This account provides a substantially different account of the same event, demonstrating the context created by the European observers. After Pickersgill purchased the head and brought it on board the ship, "the ship's officers wanted to produce empirical proof of cannibalism among the Maoris" (Obeyesekere 1992:637). Clerke described the proceeding occurrences as follows:

I ask'd [the Maori] if he'd eat a piece there directly to which he very cheerfully gave his assent. I then cut a piece of it carry'd [it] to the fire by his desire and gave it a little broil upon the Grid Iron then deliver'd it to him—he not only eat it but devour'd it most ravenously, and suck'd his fingers ½ a dozen times over in raptures: the Captain was at this time absent. [Cook 1961:293 quoted in Obeyesekere 1992:637]

Several features of this scene are valuable sites for reinterpretation³⁶.

First, it demonstrates the relationship and interaction between observer and observed. This was not a scene witnessed by Cook's crew from afar: "we are very far from Columbus's captain stumbling on bones in a Guadeloupian hut, or Crusoe finding the remains of a cannibal picnic on the beach, or Tarzan's observation of a cooking pot and human skulls. The Western 'observer' has traditionally come afterwards" (Hulme 1998:23). In this instance, the observers were actively involved with the people they observed and encouraged the event they were observing. This raises questions about who the authors of common reports are, and what their role in the interaction is. In this case, "If Cook's journal was all we had, then his officers would have remained eye-witnesses.... Everything happened in their presence (which implies lack of participation)" (Hulme 1998:22). In reality, however, the author had a pivotal role, having explicitly motivated the action. The crew had a preconceived notion of what to look for among these native people, and thus created a scene to verify their expectations.

Next, the scene demands that we question the scene's validity as an example of Maori cannibal practices. Shifting focus back to the problem of the outsider's presence, we must recognize that the account clearly does not demonstrate a traditional scene of Maori cannibalism. Obeyesekere informs us that Maoris did not eat "broiled human steaks," and explains, "The whole setting of the ship's quarter deck would have flouted all Maori conventions of cannibalism" (Obeyesekere 1992:649). Hulme reviews the scene, saying,

[Cook] conducted an experiment in which a Native proved himself a Canibal by eating human flesh: the Native ate human flesh because that is what Canibals do.

³⁶ In reinterpreting this scene, we will rely both on Obeyesekere's (1992) account directly, and on the analysis performed by another anthropologist, Hulme (1998). Hulme analyzed the same scene of Cook's narratives as examined by Obeyesekere.

Since his very identification depends on that trait, the question of motivation doesn't arise, or at least no motivation which is local to the event described, no motivation which would place the Maori in a social situation, as participating in a dialogue with his British "observers" [Hulme 1998:23].

Thus, the scene does not demonstrate any reality of Maori cannibalism. It took the practice of cannibalism out of any familiar context of its practice among the Maori and stripped it down to the basic element of consumption of human flesh. We must therefore be cautious to consider the context behind observed instances of cannibalistic behavior. With this in mind, there can be no observation—and thus no evidence—of cannibalism as it is traditionally practiced because the Western presence automatically dislocates the scene.

2. Native Perspective

PERCEPTIONS OF WHITE ARRIVAL

While the British approached encounters with new peoples with a set of expectations for what they would find, the initial contact natives had with Europeans was altogether unexpected, unprecedented, and incomprehensible. At the most basic level, we can imagine the terror they might experience upon seeing, for the first time, such oddly dressed, pale skinned beings, with strange accents and bizarre possessions. Adding to the trauma of the arrival of such strange outsiders was the threat of firepower, a development completely alien to native peoples before European contact. Depending on the details of different aspects of the cultural system, arrival of white men could be interpreted in a number of ways, each of which would foretell different repercussions for the native people. For example, the Asmat have perception of life that is deeply enmeshed in a rich spirit world. Within this context, headhunting and cannibalism is a key feature of a larger system of reciprocal warfare that is

necessary for keeping balance in the world. With this in mind, Hoffman (2014) proposed how the Asmat would have understood the arrival of the Europeans:

[It] was altogether something else, a profoundly unsettling experience, something far more than a simple imposition of rational law: the confusing appearance of super beings, the spirits their whole lives were built around appeasing and deceiving and driving away, had come to kill them with nearly supernatural weapons. [Hoffman 2014:86]

Even beyond the suspected reaction of fear that may have resulted from a group's interpretation of white arrival, the reality of initial interactions clearly demonstrates how traumatic such encounters were. Cook's first encounter with the Maoris, for example, was "dramatic, sudden, and deadly" (Obeyesekere 1992:644). Although Cook's intent was to establish friendly contact with the natives, his actions seemed to demonstrate otherwise:

Seeing two boats or Canoes coming in from Sea, I rowed to one of them in order to seize upon the people and came so near before they took notice of us that Tupia called to them to come along side and we would not hurt them, but instead of doing this they endeavored to get away, upon which I order'd a Musquet to be fire'd over their heads thinking that this would either make them surrender or jump over board, but here I was mistaken for they immediately took to their arms or whatever they had in the boat and began to attack us, this obliged us to fire upon them and unfortunately either two or three were kill'd, and one wounded, and three jumped over board, these last we took up and brought on board, where they were clothed and treated with all imaginable kindness and to the surprise of every body became at once as cheerful and merry as if they had been with their own friends; they were all three young... [Cook 1768-1771:170-1 quoted in Obeyesekere 1992:645]

In response to this, Obeyesekere suggested, "it is however not unsurprising that Cook could not understand that sudden terror followed by unimagined kindness could indeed result in the youth's becoming 'cheerful and merry,' or, to put it differently, attempting to placate the dreaded aggressor" (Obeyesekere 1992:645). This, along with another passage describing how the British shot at the natives, killing at least one, and had marines brought in to intimidate the natives if necessary, the narratives make it clear that neither Cook nor his men had any idea of how threatening their actions came across.

MIRRORED CONCLUSIONS

Obeyesekere's revision of Cook's narratives revealed an interesting feature of the native perspective, which sends a powerful message about the shaky foundation on which common attributions of cannibalism rest. During Cook's voyages, we are aware of the fact that the British were fixated on the possibility of cannibalism among the people they encountered. We are familiar with the likely British perception going into such encounters: they found themselves face-to-face with unchartered savages, dirty and unrefined, whose desires and cravings were uncurbed, and whose lack of civilization left them unable to fulfill their basic needs. We are completely unfamiliar, however, with how the natives perceived their interactions with the British, a type of person they had never encountered before. Demonstrating this perspective, Obeyesekere found multiple accounts revealing how the British fascination with the subject of cannibalism led the natives to conclude that the British were the ones who engaged in cannibalism. This perspective is demonstrated through accounts involving the Hawaiians, who did not practice cannibalism. Cook and his crew often posed the question to the natives of whether they engaged in cannibal practices.³⁷ In one instance, recorded by Lieutenant King, following a reaction of horror at the idea of doing such a thing, the Hawaiian informant responded by asking, "If that was a custom among us?" (Cook *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean undertaken by the command of his majesty, for making discoveries in the Northern Hemisphere*, vol.3:69 quoted in Obeyesekere 2005:25). Obeyesekere points out that "something curious was going on here," in that Cook believed the Hawaiians were cannibals, while the Hawaiians thought Cook and the British were planning to eat them. (Obeyesekere 2005:26). This assumption made by the

³⁷ That Cook and his crew often questioned the natives as to whether they were cannibals was discussed (Part III, Ch.2)

Hawaiians reveals that from the other perspective, such interactions can lead to a very different conclusion.

Obeyesekere took on the challenge of considering the process by which the assumption of cannibalism was reached by both sides. As we have discussed, we are familiar with the line of thinking that led the British to their conclusion. Additionally, Obeyesekere agrees that the British investigation into the possibility of Hawaiian cannibalism was a legitimate ethnographic hypothesis, supported by the known practice of cannibalism in New Zealand and elsewhere. As for the Hawaiian thought process and how their hypothesis emerged, Obeyesekere referred to Lieutenant King's journal from 1779, in which he stated:

They imagined we came from some country where provisions had failed; and that our visit to them was merely for the purpose of filling our bellies. Indeed the meager appearance of some of our crew, the hearty appetites with which we saw down to their fresh provisions, and our great anxiety to purchase, and carry them off, as much as we were able, led them, naturally enough, to such a conclusion. [Obeyesekere 2005:27]

Obeyesekere continued to conclude:

The Hawaiians' hypothesis was based on the "pragmatics of common sense" and empirical inference that characterizes the everyday thought of most peoples. Here was a ragged, filthy, half-starved bunch of people arriving on their island, gorging themselves on food and asking questions about cannibalism. Since the Hawaiians did not know that the British inquiry was a scientific hypothesis, they must be forgiven for making the practical inference that these hungry people asking questions about cannibalism were cannibals themselves and might actually eat the Hawaiians. [Obeyesekere 2005:27]

Thus, we can take our understanding of the British perception of their encounters with such natives and imagine the situation as perceived by the other side. The Hawaiians, too, found themselves face-to-face with unchartered savages, dirty and unrefined, whose desires and

cravings were uncurbed, and whose lack of civilization left them unable to fulfill their basic needs.

Further, Obeyesekere discussed the Hawaiian perspective of the British questions about cannibalism in more depth. In response to questions about cannibalism, a Hawaiian informant was said to have reacted in horror. In light of such reactions, Obeyesekere proposes:

If Lieutenant king could ask what seemed to the Hawaiians an absurd question—whether they ate their enemies slain in battle—it is not unreasonable for the Hawaiians to have made a similar inference: that since the British had slaughtered so many of their citizens and kinfolk during their brief visit to these islands, it was they who ate their slain enemies. [Obeyesekere 2005:27]

Considering the violence and ferocity the British demonstrated to the Hawaiians during their time there, the Hawaiian fear that the British were cannibals may have been more based in logic than the British assumption of Hawaiian cannibalism.

3. Native Practice

The influences that affect the sources of evidence and the practice of ethnological science of cannibalism had a considerable impact on native practices of cannibalism, as well. Here, it becomes particularly important to remember to “Conceive of an encounter in which two (or more) cultures inevitably and immediately begin to adapt as a result of the inevitable and immediate dialogue between them.” Specifically, we must remember that the arrival of the Europeans was a new, traumatic event in the history of the native peoples they encountered.³⁸ The presence of Westerners created a new context in which the rules of power, domination, and control were completely, and unexpectedly, redefined. It is *within*

³⁸ Trauma experienced by natives upon white arrival was discussed (Part V, Ch.2)

this context that we must consider observed instances of cannibalism. This process begins with the arguments that there can be no observation—and thus no evidence—of cannibalism as it is traditionally practiced because the Western presence automatically dislocates the scene.³⁹ It expands on this, however, to consider not only how European contact altered native customs but also to consider the new practices that appeared in reaction to European contact.

TASTE FOR EUROPEANS

The most obvious way that contact with Europeans affected practices of cannibalism is evident through the widely spread claim that consuming Europeans was a culturally sanctioned practice. In light of the context of contact, we can reevaluate and even debunk this claim. The most concrete forms of evidence of cannibalism during early contact between Europeans and native populations concerned native consumption of Europeans. There are numerous famous tales of Westerners who were cannibalized by native peoples, having fallen victim to another culture's prescribed traditions: Michael Rockefeller, an American, who was believed to have been cannibalized in Papua New Guinea in 1961; Reverend Thomas Baker, an English missionary, believed to have been cannibalized in Fiji in 1867; Captain James Cook, a British explorer, believed to have been cannibalized in Hawaii in 1779. The claim we are looking to challenge right now is not that these deaths were cannibalism driven murders, but that they were motivated by an established practice of consuming whites. This claim is immediately discredited, however, by the reality that it would have been impossible for native peoples to consume whites before they ever

³⁹ Arguments that observer presence eliminates the possibility for observation was discussed (Part V, Ch.1)

encountered them. Thus, *if* any of these groups ate Westerners, it was a *new* practice in response to the Western presence.

STRESS RESPONSE

Another way that contact with Europeans may have affected practices of cannibalism is suggested by the theory that cannibalism is a response generated by stress rather than a longstanding institutionalized custom. Sanday proposed this theory within the framework of ecological stress, which is defined as “any threat to the survival of all or most of the members of a society posed by a decrement in the quantity or quality of basic resources” (Laughlin and d’Aquili 1979:280 quoted in Sanday 1986:29). As was demonstrated by her cross-cultural comparisons,⁴⁰ a basic reading of the comparison tables indicates that of the societies studied that practiced some form of cannibalism, ecological stress was present in 91% of them. Seeing that further consideration of this specific point would direct our discussion towards materialist arguments for cannibalism, we will not pursue this direction any further. The importance of referencing it is to demonstrate the basic form through which cannibalism can be seen as a cultural response to stress.

For our purposes, the topic of ecological stress is less relevant than social or power stress. In his examination of cannibalism in the American Southwest, Kantner (1999) pursues a detailed critique of archaeological evidence. Through this, he demonstrates that “the reality of cannibalism might have been much more complicated than prior analyses suggest and relates some of the evidences for cannibalism to changes in power structures of Southwestern Pueblo societies” (Obeyesekere 2001:239). We have already examined how the arrival of European explorers and colonizers was a tremendous stress on native

⁴⁰ Sanday’s cross-cultural comparisons of theorized traits of cannibalistic societies was discussed (Part IV, Ch.1)

societies,⁴¹ which makes Kantner's argument of particular importance. Pickering (1999) explores the role of this stress as a trigger for cannibalism. Concluding his study of Aboriginal cannibalism, Pickering presents an alternate suggestion to the common assumption that observed instances of cannibalism demonstrate an established tradition of man-eating among the Aborigines:

While it is possible to demonstrate that an overwhelming majority of accounts of cannibalism in the Australian literature have little basis in fact, I cannot objectively conclude that acts of cannibalism never occurred; some accounts may be rooted in real acts. Nonetheless the evidence, or rather the lack of evidence, is more than sufficient to refute arguments that cannibalism was a traditional institution in Aboriginal societies. There may have been occasional acts, but, as in all societies, these were likely to have been the result of the pathological behavior of individuals or small groups acting under stress... In indigenous communities such stress may well have been induced through frontier contact, with its attendant violence, disease, and massacres—the collapse of their universe as they knew it. [Pickering 1999:67]

Thus, he clearly explains how shards of evidence that have commonly been understood as representative of a widely accepted tradition may, in fact, only demonstrate isolated behaviors in reaction to extreme circumstances.

Using this theory, that cannibalism may have occurred in some cases as a response to the social and political stresses that resulted from European arrival and subsequent colonization of native groups, we can reinterpret preexisting observations of cannibal activity. Gopal (2014) referenced the work of Otto Degener, a naturalist, who discussed cannibalism in his book "Naturalist's South Pacific Expedition in Fiji." Degener explained that the cannibalism in Fiji rose to a record height in the nineteenth-century, a trend that many attributed to "the coming of the white man, many of whom were convicts, blackbirders, beachcombers and similar scum... [whose] abandoned and dissolute living prompted the natives to unspeakable savagery" (Gopal 2014:2). Seeing that chiefs often took

⁴¹ How European arrival caused stress on native societies was discussed (Part V, Ch.2)

on white men as their advisors, the “lusts and cruelties” of the white men frequently set a bad example, resulting in wars and bloodshed across the islands where those who were defeated were consumed as food. In this interpretation, white arrival is seen as the cause of increased cannibal activity because the white men who arrived in Fiji were criminals, whose horrible behavior set an example that the Fijians followed. Using the theory of stress caused by European arrival, however, we can propose an alternate interpretation: the response of terror to the threat of firepower and white aggression, the imposition of authority of Europeans over Fijians, and the deconstruction of Fijian society through colonization, were all elements that stressed Fijian society, motivating increased cannibal incidents among the Fijians.

COMMODIZATION OF TRADITION

A final way that contact with the Western world has affected practices of cannibalism is indicated by the way cannibalism has become commoditized by the cultures to which it had been attributed. The fascination the West has with cannibalism did not go unnoticed by native populations to which it was attributed, and in turn stimulated cannibal practices and directed emphasis towards the theme of cannibalism. As was mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, during my time in Fiji, I was frequently reminded of the role cannibalism plays in contemporary Fijian society, not as a practice, but as a tourist attraction. This is evident in enthusiasm with which vendors promote the cannibal forks. Regardless of the reality of cannibalism in Fiji’s history, it is a theme that has authority in Fiji’s present. There is a tendency for some Fijians to draw attention to the idea that they used to be fearsome cannibals, which is evidenced by such artifacts as the cannibal fork. Even though we have such a strong revulsion for cannibalism, we are powerfully attracted to

its existence. The Fijian vendors know this; they know about our Western obsession with cannibalism, and they have turned the branding we gave them of “Cannibals” into a tool, in this case, for economic growth.

There are an abundance of similar examples of how contact with Westerners turned cannibalism into a commodity. One of these examples is one we have already looked at, which was presented in Cook’s narratives. In 1773, Cook and his crew were in New Zealand among the Maori, who did practice cannibalism. An account explained that upon coming upon the remains of a youth recently killed in battle, a lieutenant, Richard Pickersgill, purchased the head for the price of two nails. It is explained, “the tradition of buying Maori heads had already been started in 1770 by Joseph Banks on the very first voyage” (Beaglehole 1974:213 quoted in Obeyesekere 1992:637). Knowing this, Obeyesekere remarks that it is unsurprising that the natives had gone to this area to wage battle, for “according to Reinhold Forster, the scientist of the second voyage, this tribal war was itself provoked by the British demand for ‘Curiosities.’ When one group exhausted their supplies, they raided another for heads and other artifacts” (Obeyesekere 1992:637). Thus, while the existence of heads procured in battle is often interpreted as evidence of rampant headhunting—often associated with cannibalism—the reality may be that such instances were deliberate acts on behalf of the natives to fuel Western fascination. Once the natives caught on to the Westerners’ desire to purchase heads and other such items, actions to supply this demand increased.

Part VI: Conclusion - Cannibalism vs. Anthropophagy

Before concluding this study, I want to mention that I am aware that the interest and debate over cannibalism among anthropologists continues. Specifically, the recent publications of Eduardo Vivieros de Castro have brought a renewed perspective; I was made aware of his publications during the final stages of preparation of my thesis. Cannibalism maintains its rank as a topic of considerable attention within the discipline, and I expect the discussion will continue for some time into the future.

Having thoroughly reexamined and reinterpreted anthropological studies of cannibalism, I believe we can use our findings to support a general conclusion about the concept of human flesh eating within anthropology, distinguishing the fact of human consumption in ritual from the fantasy of cannibalism. Due to the substantial role that popular Western perceptions, opinions, and discourses have in influencing the way scholars approach the topic and form their ultimate conclusions, I believe we can confidently support the argument (Arens 1998; Goldman 2003; Hulme 1998; Obeyesekere 1998, 1992) that “anthropophagy” should remain a general term, describing the fact of human sacrifice, while the term “cannibalism” should be reserved only to describe the fantasy of the flesh eating “other.” This distinction is deeply intertwined with the concept of the discourse on cannibalism.⁴² Just as the discourse on cannibalism is not a portrayal of its practice, the concept of “cannibalism” does not refer to the regular practice of consuming human flesh.

⁴² The discourse on cannibalism was discussed (Part II, Ch.5)

Rather, it specifically discusses the fantastic imagined creation of widespread human consumption. Collectively, the perceptions, fantasies, and discourses on cannibalism create the Western Cannibal Complex, which is not the same as the traditional ritual anthropophagy that is found in cultures across the world.

We should refer back to the assertion I made when introducing the aims of this thesis, stating that this is not intended to be “a study of whether or not cannibalism occurs, or occurred, in any culture. I neither believe, nor do I wish to assert, that cannibalism has never existed as an isolated or even institutionalized practice.”⁴³ Congruent with this idea, Obeyesekere elucidated that in his 1992 publication: “I do not deny the practice of anthropophagy, either in the context of human sacrifice or, on occasion, as cannibalism itself, particularly in the context of the European intrusion” (Obeyesekere 1998:45-6). Both Obeyesekere and I aimed instead to examine the reality behind the claim, “the overwhelming number of cases of imputed cannibalism were products of the European fantasy” (Obeyesekere 1998:64). Arens also pursued a similar aim, clarifying that *The Man Eating Myth* (1979) was concerned more with what anthropology defines as “gustatory” cannibalism than “ritual” cannibalism.

Failure to observe this distinction, however, has been detrimental to anthropological studies of anthropophagy. Obeyesekere described the failure of even sophisticated anthropologists to consider this distinction, which results in reports that subsume “the double features of anthropophagy into the ethnographic category of ‘cannibalism’” (Obeyesekere 1998:64). What may be the largest impact this damage has caused is that it

⁴³ This statement was made (Part I, Ch.5)

obscures the role of human sacrifice in human flesh eating.⁴⁴ This sentiment is echoed throughout many of the sources used to develop this thesis. Obeyesekere, for example, discussed the idea as it manifests in the Western construction of Maori cannibalism:

Maori cannibalism must be seen in the larger context of human sacrifice common to Polynesian society. It is human sacrifice that is the key institution... I suggest that Polynesians do not practice cannibalism, but instead practiced an anthropophagy (displaced or real) associated with human sacrifice. [Obeyesekere 1992:653]

Maori anthropophagy, therefore, is deeply embedded in a system of ritual human sacrifice. This sacrifice structure has been displaced and repositioned under the category of cannibalism.

Arens described the difference between the forms of cannibalism he used in his argument – “gustatory” and “ritual” – by saying: “the first instance implies the consumption of human flesh as a food for the body, and the second as food for the soul” (Arens 1998:46). Expanding on these differences, it is obvious how important the distinction is to what we have reviewed:

The best known cases – the Caribs, Aztecs, and Fore, at one time or another since intellectual tastes change – were all recognized as gustatory cannibals and viewed as lacking culture in the sense of being unable to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable foodstuffs. Into the second category fall those presumed cannibals dominated by ritual rather than more concrete concerns. [Arens 1998:46]

This description of how gustatory cannibals are perceived and understood should be familiar at this point. In this way, cannibalism is presented as a practice of the “other,” those who are the antithesis of moral order, beyond of the reaches of civilization. They consume human flesh because they are incapable of making the assessment that human flesh should not be consumed as “food” in the traditional sense. Alternatively, ritual cannibals do not accept the idea that human flesh can ever be consumed for bodily sustenance purposes. Although

⁴⁴ This aligns with Sahlins’ critique of Harris’ studies for ignoring the symbolic interpretations behind Aztec cannibalism (Part I, Ch. 2)

Arens set out to examine the consumption of human flesh for either purpose, his study focused more on gustatory cannibalism because “the imagery contended with, including the volume’s illustrations, was with the grosser gustatory type, so easy to portray and so ingrained in popular imagination” (Arens 1998:46). Thus, the distinction between the unruly, uninhibited flesh eating depicted in the Western imagination and the ritualized, restrained tradition of ritual consumption of human flesh becomes blurred, and become forced into one concept:

When ‘cannibalism’ takes hold of the European imagination, the eating of human flesh (or its mimesis) as a consubstantial act associated with the ‘sacrifice’ is downplayed or fused with cannibalism itself. [Obeyesekere 1998:64]

Studying human flesh eating in a way that does not differentiate anthropophagy from cannibalism has resulted in a process through which the terms have merged, and the ritual basis that grounds the practice has faded into the background.

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